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Dakota Dan, THE RECKLESS RANGER;

OR,

The Bee-Hunters' Excursion.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "DEATH-NOTCH," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNLUCKY RIDER.

SOUTHERN DAKOTA of the year 18—.

A cottonwood grove on the Keya Paha river, some thirty miles from its confluence with the Niobrara.

Within that grove a score of persons were assembled on a bright afternoon of a September day. All were Indians, with a few exceptions. The ponies browsing near bore strong evidence of having been severely ridden. At

one side was a noble-looking horse of the new American breed, caparisoned with an American saddle and bridle. His sides were dripping with sweat, his flanks were white with foam and quivering with over-exertion; his whole frame shook under the throbbing of his great heart; his nostrils were dilated and steaming—he was panting with sheer exhaustion.

In the midst of the group of Indians was the master of that noble beast. His hands were securely bound at his back—he was a prisoner. His face was haggard and dust-begrimed, yet wore a firm, determined and resolute look, that at times seemed to awe the savage horde around him. He was a man of some five and forty years, of medium size, with a pleasant, yet piercing dark-gray eye; a thin, angular face, the lower part of which was covered with a smooth, iron-gray beard. His hair was of the same color as his beard, though closely cropped, showing the outlines of a well-shaped head. He was dressed in a citizen's suit, which

was, of itself, evidence of his not belonging upon the border.

The savages were all Yankton Sioux. Some were in war-paint—some were not. Their leader was a white man, at whose very beck and nod all seemed to act with humble obedience. He was a person upon whose face the inner character was plainly written. It combined every evidence of wickedness and subtle cunning to be seen upon the dusky faces of his coadjutors; and in every other countenance but his, the prisoner could see a faint glimmer of human feeling—a spark that he may have kindled into mercy's hopeful light, had it not been for the cold, relentless look upon White Falcon's face.

White Falcon, as he was called by the Indians, and Donald Gray by his renegade associates, was a man of some fifty years, judging from his seamed features, gray whiskers and hair. But his movements, voice, and physical powers were those of a man of thirty; and between the two, the



DAN STARTED UP, CLASPED HIS RIFLE, AND PEERED INTO THE GLOOMY SHADOWS AROUND HIM.

prisoner was left in doubt as to the man's age, but not as to his villainy of heart.

That morning, Jonathan Duncan had been thirty miles north of where we now find him a captive. He was crossing the plain from the Missouri river, unaware of his proximity to danger, until he suddenly found that he was being pursued by a band of Indians. He at once put his horse to its utmost speed, feeling certain of his ability to outstrip the Indians in the race; and he did so for a short distance, but he had underestimated the endurance of the Indians' ponies, and after a race of a score and a half miles, was overtaken on the banks of the Keya Paha, where we now find them assembled.

After he had been made prisoner, Duncan was subjected to a series of blows, kicks and taunts, given to test his courage and fortitude. He bore all, however, with unflinching resignation, and by looks defied the jeering horde around him.

"The horse of the pale-face is fast, like the arrow; but soon gives out. The ponies of the Indian are slow, but like the bird, they can go a long ways," philosophized a red-skin.

"Well," in a calm tone replied Duncan, "if that stream had been behind me instead of before, I am inclined to think the race would be going on yet."

"A poor excuse is better than none," replied White Falcon, indignant at the prisoner's response.

"To be sure it is, mighty chief of the filthy Yankton Sioux," retorted Jonathan, with disdain.

"You are disposed to regard your situation quite indifferently, stranger," asserted White Falcon, "but—but—"

"But what, outcast of civilization?" interupted Duncan, defiantly, anticipating some threat from the chief.

"Your insolent language shall be your death-warrant," affirmed the chief. "While our ponies are resting from their hard ride, we shall endeavor to pass the time in trying your power of endurance by fire and blood-letting. And, to begin with, I will see what you have of value or consequence upon your person; then I will pass you over to the tender mercy of my braves."

So saying, the renegade chief proceeded to search the person of the prisoner, and his labor was not without reward. In a side-pocket he found a small Derringer revolver, which he at once appropriated. In another pocket he found a small, time-worn picture-case. This he opened, and was almost startled by the sight of the picture that met his eyes.

It was of a young and beautiful woman, but the style of her dress and the worn and faded condition of the picture was evidence of its having been taken years ago. For some time the chief stood and gazed upon it. At times his eyes wandered away with a vacant stare, and his brows contracted as if he was trying to recall something from the shadows of the forgotten past. In addition to the revolver and picture, he found a note upon the captive bearing date of a few weeks previous, and which read:

"JONATHAN DUNCAN, Esq.:

"Dear Sir:—If your search proves unsuccessful in Southern Nebraska, don't fail to visit the settlement on the Niobrara river in Southern Dakota. I have some evidence of the parties having drifted into that country. After a long and diligent search, we have found the picture so much desired, and send it herewith. I hope it may prove the key to your success. The reward has been increased to \$10,000."

"Your friend, ADAM."

"Ten thousand dollars reward! Just so!" ejaculated the chief, in surprise. "I see now, Jonathan Duncan, Esquire, that you are some kind of a hound of the law, searching for somebody for whom a reward is offered that'd make a poor Indian chief rich; and ma'be it will, for bless my soul if I don't know where to lay my hands upon a young lady whose face is the counterpart of this picture. And, as

your friend Adam surmises, she is in the Niobrara settlement. Is it the original of this picture, her father, mother, brother, sister or child that you're in search of? Is he, or she, an heir or heiress?—or an escaped convict, or what?"

"Or what," was the laconic reply of Jonathan.

"Never mind, Squire Duncan," replied the chief, placing the picture and paper in his pocket, "we'll fetch the truth out of you pretty soon. Fire around one's shins conduced to veracity, and acts as a lubricator to one's tongue. You can choose between the fire and the truth of the facts connected with this picture and paper."

"I have no choice, Sir Mighty Outcast," replied Duncan.

"You can act your pleasure."

"Then let my braves set the stake," the villain said, addressing his warriors.

A savage yell burst forth upon the air, and a commotion of joy swayed the group of warriors. The wildest excitement and activity pervaded the camp, all of which Jonathan Duncan regarded with outward indifference. His inward fears, however, assumed painful proportions, for he had not a doubt but that his fate was sealed—that he stood face to face with a horrible death. But he mentally commanded his soul to God and asked for strength to bear his torture until death came to his relief. He knew that a betrayal of fear, or an appeal to the savages for mercy, would only be prolonging his suffering.

He gazed around him—at the green trees overhead, the murmuring river, at the slowly declining sun soon to be blotted from his sight forever. Then his gaze became fixed upon vacancy—he was thinking—perhaps of home—of bright faces that were wont to grow brighter at his coming. He bit his lip to keep back the emotions struggling upward in his breast.

The exclamation of an Indian suddenly drew his attention from these painful reflections.

The savages were in commotion, and for the time being, their attention was diverted from their work by the appearance of an object on the plain about half a mile to the northward.

CHAPTER II.

THE ORACLE, PATIENCE AND HUMILITY.

THE grove in which the Indians were encamped was but a narrow belt of trees fringing the shore of the Keya Paha, and as the view of the plain was but little obstructed by undergrowth, the savages could plainly see the object approaching over the plain; and they had no difficulty in making it, or rather *them*, out; they were a man, horse and dog.

The man was walking and leading the horse, while the dog skulked with lowered head and tail at the heels of the latter. They were moving very slowly and with apparent difficulty, and as they drew nearer the red skins could see that the horse was limping along upon three legs. The man was white—this was easy enough determined by the Sioux, long before he came close enough for them to discriminate between colors. He was coming directly toward the point where they stood, and as he came still closer, White Falcon, as well as the prisoner, heard him suddenly break forth in a song familiar to them, though a stranger to the ears of the chief.

All listened intently, and something like a smile, that came from a sting of remorse, swept over the face of the renegade as he heard the singer trill forth, in hoarse, discordant notes, the

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the chief, trying to dispel from his mind some vague recollection of better days, "it's some crazy tramp, or old religious fanatic. Well, we'll have some sport with him too, boys, for I see he's coming on a bee-line for this point. It may be he's coming to say grace for your soul, Squire Duncan."

"Better say it for yours," was Duncan's reply.

The stranger came on, apparently enraptured by the music of his own voice. He entered the grove and came on within ten paces of the savages before he discovered their presence. When he did, however, his singing ended with a doleful squeak, and he came to a sudden halt. Throwing up his hands in wild surprise, he drawled forth in a hesitating, woe-begone tone:

"Whoa, Patience and Humility! At last, at last, after long journeying through the desert, we've struck the camp of the Phillistines!"

In obedience to the command of their master, the horse stopped, and the dog squatted on his haunches at his heels.

A laugh burst from the lips of Gray and his followers.

Duncan glanced at the bold intruder in vain hopes that he might recognize him as a friend, or one who had, in some manner, the power to save him from death. But the sight that met his view was anything but one calculated to inspire hope in a desponding breast. In fact the prisoner had never looked upon a more wretched and pitiable specimen of humanity than the being who had just halted in his presence.

He was a little, wiry-looking man of perhaps five and fifty years, with a thin, long face, a sharp, hooked nose, and small, steel-gray eyes. His mouth was of unusual size and encircled with a short, bristling gray beard. His whole face was comical in its outlines, yet wore an expression of childish simplicity. His eyes were the most remarkable feature of the man. They were possessed of a strange mobility—now glittering with the keenness of a hawk's, now glowing with the fierceness of the tiger's, now beaming with the softness of a maiden's—always relaxing into that dull, vacant stare of one devoid of reason.

His dress was as old and antiquated as himself. On his head he wore a coon-skin cap, to which had been attached the brim of an old black felt hat. His coat was the remnant of a fine black broadcloth garment; it was several sizes too large for him, and hung upon him like the proverbial "shirt on a bean-pole." The sleeves were rolled up, displaying his bony wrists, while the remaining half of the skirt rested upon his heel. His pants were made of buck-skin, but unlike the coat, were too small for him, the shortness of the waist permitting his shirt to foam gracefully out over the top. One foot was encased in a moccasin, the other in an old high-topped boot that he had doubtless picked up around some military post.

He carried no weapons of any kind except a large, dull jack-knife, which was evidence of his peaceful and harmless spirit.

His horse was as sorry a looking creature as himself. It might have been a quarter of a century old, judging from appearance. It was raw-boned, long-legged and drawn up almost into a knot. Every joint appeared to be stiff, and every limb crippled in some way or other. One of its fore legs was wrapped in a bandage of old rags held in place by strips of fibrous bark. It was with the greatest difficulty that it put foot to the ground; and when ordered to stop by its master, it did so with evident pleasure. It dropped its head and stubby tail, closed its eyes and stood and slept in silence, totally indifferent to the presence of the savages, or the myriad of flies that buzzed around.

A rope answered the purpose of a bridle, and an old Indian blanket that of a saddle.

The dog was a fit companion of the man and horse. He was a cross between the gray-hound and spaniel, though a more abject and cowardly-looking cur could scarcely be found. With his head down, his tail between his legs, he cowered at the heels of the horse, and closed his great, blood-shot eyes and slept in peace.

"Well, who are you that comes here singin' like an escaped Bedlamite?" demanded White Falcon, in feigned anger.

"Me? me?" demanded the doleful looking old tramp, in great astonishment; "why, man of sin, I'm the Oracle of Peace come outer the East to proclaim the—"

"The devil!" interrupted the renegade, savagely, "you're lying, man; you're some infernal old spy come sneakin' round here in disguise."

The chief had resolved to convey this idea, despite his belief that the Oracle was crazy, for fear the man might have been trying to deceive him. Insanity, however, showed itself too plainly on every feature to be mistaken in the character before him.

"Harkee, man, to the voice of wisdom speakin' thro' years of experience," the tramp replied, shaking his bony finger reprovingly at Donald Gray; "I come as you see me, plainly clad—under no disguise. I come to plant the seed of Peace and Christianity into the hearts of the red heathens of Ameriky. I've suffered many persecutions of body and mind to git here, and the strength of Patience, my hoss yere, and old Humility, my dorg thar, hev been sorely tried with long sojournin'. But at last, at last we've ritched the camp of the benighted red man, and perchance a season of rest is come to our weary bodies arter our pilgrimage."

"Well, from whence came you?" asked the chief.

"Like John the Baptist, I came from outer the wilderness of Judea."

"Indeed," replied the chief, to whom, and the other renades, the tramp's insane assertions had become amusing; "well, Sir Oracle, you look the worse of the wear and tear of the trip."

"You speak truthfully, man of sin; and Patience, my horse heré, and Humility, my dorg thar, hev both been smartly reduced in flesh and spirit—even more than me, for Patience, my horse thar, has carried me oftentimes; while Humility, my dorg thar, has guarded me all night from beasts of prey while I slept, and that you mus' know's mos' awful rackin' on the physical constitution."

"He looks as though he was a savage dog," said White Falcon. "I reckon he'd attack a piece of raw meat quick enough, wouldn't he?"

"He may be hungering like his master, and would eat that which is digestible if placed within a git-atable distance. But since leaving the fort called Randall, our supplies has been exhausted, and we've been trustin' to Providence for a long time."

"I'm thinking Providence 'll let you starve if you don't help yourself a little."

"Ah!" sighed the man, shaking his head, "that is the doctrine of sin the world over. But why is that man in bonds? Is he not a heathen among you?"

"He is, but we're soon going to send his spirit to the other world; to be plain, we're going to roast him, and if you tarry long enough your dorg can have—"

"Oh, Judea!" exclaimed the Oracle, elevating his hands in horror, and rolling his eyes upward in evident pain, "can't I prevail on you to let that man go free, that he may repent of the deeds done in the body?"

"His sins, Sir Oracle, are the same as yours. He had the audacity to intrude upon grounds sacred to the red-men."

"But perchance he came with evil in his heart, whereas I come with love and good will to'rd all mankind, the beasts of

the field, the birds of the air, and the dwellers in the sea; and to preach to the benighted heathen of Ameriky. Already hev I wrought much good in my travels, though my footsteps hev been beset with all the temptashins that beset the pilgrim in his progress to heaven; yet I feel good in spirit over my deeds."

"I observe that your language savors of oriental refinement," said Donald Gray, who was possessed of some education.

"Not so much as it used to be. Since I kem into this 'ere land of the ungodly, my langwidge hes become korrupted —my words are not alers the most elegant, nor my sentences the most forcible; but they're sich as can only be understood by the heathens of the land. It's thro' necessity, not of choice, that I'm rude into my speech."

"I am inclined to think that you are a consummate old villain—a lying spy, trying to deceive us with your insane palaver and idiotic face. But that, let me tell you, you cannot do. You already know too much to leave here alive with that tongue of yours. Braves, see that the old villain is secured against doing us harm."

Ever ready to comply with the will of their chief, the warriors started toward the Oracle, who calmly folded his arms across his breast, and striking an attitude intended for resignation, but which was provokingly comical, he said:

"I submit without resistance, you children of benighted minds. Ye needn't bind me, for I'm more'n willin' to remain. Thar is Patience, my hoss here, and Humility, my dorg thar; take 'em both, feed 'em, and with the respekt due their understandin'. Patience, she comes of noble blood; her sire was as fine a hoss as ever pounded Arabian soil, and her dam—ah, she war a noble critter too. And that 'ere dorg, bless me! I could trace his pedigree back to Noah and the ark. To be sure I could. But"—and he turned to his animals—"Patience, go with the heathens—Humility, submit with Christian resignashin."

A savage led Patience to one side and hitched her, while another fastened a lariat around Humility's neck and tied him to a sapling. The Oracle was not bound, for the chief had not the slightest fear of his attempting to desert. He was, in fact, fully satisfied of the man's insanity, and of his perfect harmlessness.

The savages were about to resume their preparations for the execution of Duncan, when the Oracle interrupted them, saying:

"Friends, I want to leave yer camp durin' the abominable execution of that man, if I'm to leave at all. The smell o' burnin' martyrs alers did make me sick as p'isen. But if I'm to die, let me die fust, and I'll show him how to go it game, like the 'Postles of old.'

There were two other renegades in the party besides Gray, whose recklessness of character had banished all human feeling and mercy from their hearts; and in the crazy tramp and his poor old mare, they foresaw a bit of rare, brutal sport. Sidling up to the chief, one of them said:

"I say, Donald, let's have some fun with the Oracle of Peace."

"How?"

"Give him a chance for his life—let him win it in a hoss-race."

Donald winked his approval, then burst into a roar of laughter over the idea.

It is not to be supposed that the Indians were ignorant of what was being said. Several of them understood the English language, and these interpreted to the others; so that all were enabled to enjoy the sport together.

"Oracle," said Gray, addressing the tramp, "wouldn't you like a chance for life?"

"Verily, life are sweet, even to the vilest critter that creeps, moves or has a bein'," replied the man of peace.

"Wouldn't you be willin' to run your mare 'gainst one of our ponies for your life?"

"Oh, Judea! abomination! destruction!" groaned the Oracle, as if shocked by the idea. "Racin' and gamblin' comes not within the pale of the principles of peace and love. It belongs only to the ungodly—the unwashed sinner. Moreover, Patience, my hoss here, is sufferin' dire afflictions on the right fore leg from the bite of the treacherous serpent that wears little bells onto its tail. Therefore I must decline to race with the heathens, and to uphold them in their ungodliness."

"Then you shall die, although you have your life in your own hands," said Donald Gray. "If you will take your mare and run her against one of our ponies, your life will be spared if you come out best in the race."

"Life are sweet, arter all," reflected the Oracle, "and I am sorely tempted to try you a heat, and would, if it warn't fur poor Patience's affliction of the leg. As she is, she can only hop along on three legs to a time. And yit I wouldn't hesitate to try one of yer slowest racers if ye'd give me a few hundred yards the adwantage."

The renegades, and those of the Indians who understood English, indulged in a hearty fit of laughter. They saw that the love of life was strong, even in a crazy man; and that freedom was paramount to the principles he advocated.

"You can have your choice, Oracle; run the race or die."

"Oh, Judea!" sighed the man; "then if yer sin-benighted minds can conceive no Christian scheme for my deliverance outen bondage, I will stoop to the abominable sin of takin' my mare here onto the track. But I have no hopes of takin' the ante, but race beca'se it's a Christian dooty for me to try to save my precious life, for the benefit of others yit to come. So let a heathen bring out a slow racer, and I will run him, sinse I am forced to it; yet I proclaim in a voice of thunder that it be an abominable sin to put that poor critter thar onto the track. In course it be."

CHAPTER III.

THE RACE AND ITS RESULT.

WHILE the preliminaries of the race were being made by the Indians and their white coadjutors, the Oracle of Peace strode about the camp, apparently indifferent to the arrangements that were being made for the cruel sport of which he and his mare were the unsuspecting subjects. He passed and repassed before Jonathan Duncan, shaking his head and muttering loud, but incoherently, now and then glancing at the captive's face with the deepest expression of human sympathy.

"I sw'ar," said Bill Davy, one of the renegades, "I b'lieve the feller's talkin' Dutch to the squire."

"Yes, hog Dutch," replied Donald Gray.

The Oracle continued his sauntering about the camp, but finally advanced to where Humility was tied, and stooping, he patted the dog affectionately upon the head, and said, in a low, whimpering, childish tone:

"Ah, mc, Humility! this are a big blunder fur us to make. The heart of these red Phillistines appear to have no mercy, whatsumever. So I reckon our time to part has come, arter long years of sojournin' together. I may, and I may not, win the race, but that snake-bitten leg of Patience is ag'in' me, ten to one. But if ye hev to die, Humility, die game. Ye'll maybe go into the soup-kettle, but if ye make as good soup as ye hev companion, these 'ere pesky heathens will 'ave a delicious time. Look here, ole dorg; see what an insignificant thing holds yer life in check—a little string which one sweep of my knife 'd cut."

As he concluded with a shake of the head, the crazy man took hold of the dog's rope and held it up between his fingers, and glanced at the dog, then at the rope, with a vacant, listless stare. Humility looked up into his master's face, dumb almost as his own, with an almost human apprehension; then he whined piteously, licked his chops as with an air of satisfaction, and squatted down upon his haunches.

One may have thought that there existed the animal mode of communication between these two creatures, dog and master; but, aside from the latter's power of speech, neither betrayed the knowledge even of an intelligent animal.

"And lookey here, Humility, is another victim of this heathenish country," drawled the tramp, advancing to Duncan and laying his hand upon the captive's head. "Poor feller, the Phillistines hev got him, too, doggy, and he'll hev to die, I 'spekt. And jist look here, Humility, what a insignificant thing stands between him and life and freedom," and he took hold of the captive's bonds and fingered over them some time in an easy, thoughtless manner; but the chief saw that he made no attempt to free the captive.

"All ready, Sir Oracle," the chief at length called out.

"Amen," was the grave, solemn response.

Then the tramp advanced to where his mare was hitched, unfastened her and followed White Falcon and all but two of his warriors, who had been left to guard Duncan, to the edge of the open plain.

With a critical eye he scanned the opponent's horse, shook his head doubtfully, and sighed, in a tone whose lugubriousness was in consonance with that of his face:

"Verily, Patience, the chances are against us, a thousand to one. The red heathen's horse is keen of limb, young, supple, and free of snake-bites. Our only chances lay in the smoky Phillistine's horse steppin' into a mole-hill and breakin' of his neck. And while we are certain of defeat, we are liable to run into the mole-hole-hill ourselves. Lord, to be sure we are!"

A savage outburst of laughter followed this lamentation of the Oracle.

"Verily, heathen with the smoky skin, the day 'll come, perchance, when the laff will be shifted to the other side of thy facial openin'."

The distance to be run was a quarter of a mile. The ground was stepped off by one of the renegades and the racers escorted to the starting point by several warriors on foot. The Oracle led his mare to the place, and as she hobbled along at times on three legs, the Indians and renegades seemed transported with merriment at sight of the doleful-looking figure presented by both the master and the beast.

With some difficulty, after suffering a severe fall, the tramp succeeded in scrambling to the back of his mare. He then turned the animal facing the winning goal, and announced his readiness to start.

A deep silence now fell upon the plain, notwithstanding the ridiculousness of the affair.

The firing of a rifle by the renegade chief, who was at the opposite end of the course, was to be the signal to start. The Oracle sat with his eyes fixed upon the group at the other side of the plain, burning with a strange, unnatural luster. Suddenly he saw a little cloud of smoke puff out upon the air; then, as the clear report of the rifle came quivering forth upon the breeze, the Oracle was heard to shout aloud, in a clear, unnatural voice, the single word:

"Go!"

Quick as a flash Patience's eyes flew open, her head was lifted, her ears became erect, her form straightened out, and like an arrow she shot away over the plain by the side of her opponent. All her stupidity, stiffness and lameness had vanished under the magic of her master's voice.

Yell after yell arose from the lips of the spectators, that

was answered by a wild, frenzied shout from the lips of the Oracle, who sat half doubled upon his beast, while his coat-tail flapped in the wind behind, and his hat-brim dropped like a mask over his face. To the amusement of those at the starting point, the great "military" boot of the tramp slipped from his foot at the second bound of his mare, but he gave no heed to this, and sped on.

The yells of the savages increased as the racers sped on, but their yells were outbursts of surprise, not the expression of the amusement that they had anticipated; for, side by side with the Indian racer, sped Patience, the face of her rider changing from its look of imbecility to that of silent triumph.

"This beats you, now don't it, smoky-skin?" the Oracle suddenly called out to his opponent in a tone that was distinctly audible above the swish and thud of the horses' feet through the grass and upon the hard earth.

"Ugh!" was the response of the Indian, who, with eyes starting with excitement, laid the whip vigorously across his beast.

"That's it, Ingin, score it on," continued the Oracle, growing warm under the excitement of the race; "alers whip on the hairy side, smoky. Ole Patience, my mare here, wa'n't as lame as ye thought, war she? Like all females, she's deceivin', ain't she? She can't be beat on these prairies a-runnin' and playin' 'possum, can she? Whew! aren't we a-sailin', though, now? I could jockey you now, Ingin, like thunderation; but I won't, will I? But I'll tell ye what I can do: I can beat you, and I'm gorin' to do it. So now, ole gal, toe into it—buckle right down to the work, Patience—peg away, ole critter—scatter dirt in smoky's eyes—lick her down, Pacie—scat! whoop, hurrah, here we go—good-by, smoky!"

Away from the side of the Indian, like a bird on the wing, glided the mare with her rider. The spectators were astounded. Donald Gray began cursing with impetuous rage. He discovered his mistake when too late. He and his men had been duped. The cunning old tramp and his trained mare had played their parts well.

As he saw the Oracle turn from the track and sweep away like the wind across the plain, White Falcon's rage knew no bounds. He fairly fumed, cursed his own stupidity and that of his men, calling the wrath of heaven upon them.

Like a madman he tore away toward the camp to procure his own beast, an animal of remarkable speed, to start in pursuit of the cunning old tramp. But when he reached the camp, what was his astonishment to find that his animal was gone!

He turned to make inquiry regarding it, of Duncan's two guards. They were not there, and, to add to his fury and astonishment, he discovered that both Jonathan Duncan and the dog Humility were gone.

A glance at the straps with which the dog had been tied showed the imprint of teeth upon it. This led to the discovery that it had been gnawed in two. Further investigation showed that Duncan's bonds had also been severed by the dog's teeth.

Then the chief could account for the absence of his horse: Duncan had escaped upon it. In this he was right; although two guards had been left with the captive while the others went to attend the race, their curiosity got the better of their sense of duty, and the moment they heard the yells and shouts of their friends, they deserted their post and ran to the edge of the plain where they could see what was going on.

This proved even more fortunate than the tramp had hoped for; it left the coast clear for the dog to act its part. And no sooner did the sagacious animal hear his master's voice shouting in triumph, out upon the plain, than he applied his

teeth to his bond, and in a moment snapped it in two. Then, still remembering the silent commands of his master, he sprung forward and gnawed Duncan's thongs off his wrists.

The captive could scarcely realize what had transpired—that an animal could possibly have so much human understanding, and before he was cognizant of the fact, Humility was gone.

Realizing that he was free, Duncan knew that not a moment was to be lost in putting distance between himself and the red-skins, and selecting a fleet-looking stud from among the Indians' ponies, he mounted it and fled. He shaped his course along the river until a point of timber jutting out into the plain would conceal him from view of the savages; then he turned into the open prairie and sped away up the Keya Paha on the trail of the Oracle and his dog.

He rode rapidly forward for nearly an hour. No sign of pursuers could be seen. At length he turned into the woods again, and halted to rest his jaded beast and take his bearings for a point of safety.

A voice hailed him.

"I say, stranger," it said, "you made yer 'scape, did ye? Things all worked like clock-wheels, didn't it though?"

It was the voice of the Oracle, who at this juncture rode up. Humility was following in his accustomed place at Patience's heels.

"Thank Heaven, my dear sir," Jonathan Duncan exclaimed, in a tone full of gratitude and joy; "you are the most original piece of human deception I ever met. I never saw a more perfect specimen of imbecility than you were outside of an insane asylum. You have saved my life, stranger, and in a manner that seems miraculous."

"Then Humility, my dorg thar, did his work up skienflin-tically, did he? Done jist as I hinted to him, did he? He didn't act awkward 'bout it, did he? By Judeal! it was a good thing we both had a smattern of low Dutch, wa'n't it? I told ye I'd git ye outen thar, didn't I? That renegade pretty nigh took the hint when I war mutterin' to you. The red devils had you purty tight, tho'; and it's well I see'd 'em chasin' ye across the plain. I see'd ye war 'bout blowed, and knowed they'd rake ye in down at the river, and when I heard 'em screechin' I knowed ye war raked, and I jist slipped down the river, and seein' you war in for a fry, I concluded to come foaly on 'em. Good thing I had 'em ole close handy—played the oracle well, didn't I? But I sw'ar I came mortal nigh rippin' out an ole-fashi'n cuss-word several times. Oriental langwidge! ha! ha!—that's good on the chief, ar'n't it? But, I'll tell ye, stranger, Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, are two the best-trained animails outside of Barnum's big show—good as ever boxed sod, or squizzed the jugular of a red-skin. Why, Patience, my mare here, is the fleetest critter in all Dakota, and I'll bet my scalp on her every clip. See, she gits herself better'n she did, don't she? Humility, my dorg thar, has a thunderin' site of man-gumpshun 'bout him, ar'n't he?—say, what be your name, stranger?"

"Jonathan Duncan. May I ask the same of you?" replied Duncan.

"To be sure, Jonathan; speak right out. You see, I'm a stranger in these diggin's, myself. I've jist come down from the nor'-west to this kentry. But up thar, Jonathan—away up in the northern part of this territory, I war familiarly called Dakota Dan, the Ranger; and I swear to the stars, Jonathan, Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, are three jolly sailors. Yes, I'm Dakota Dan, and proud I be of the name and the man too, Jonathan. Here, yer hand. Shake to eternal friendship."

CHAPTER IV.

JONATHAN DUNCAN'S MISSION.

JONATHAN DUNCAN was happily surprised by the revelation of the Oracle. Of all persons in the territory, Dakota Dan was the one he most desired to meet. Although he had never seen him before, he knew him well by reputation. In fact, his field of operation had hitherto been confined to northern Montana and Dakota, and no one knew of his presence on the Keya Paha until he had introduced himself to Duncan—first, demonstrating his efficiency in circumventing the red-skins, and as a scout. His recent advent into the country, therefore, accounted for his being unknown by White Falcon and his warriors.

Duncan had imagined that Dakota Dan was a specimen of perfect and powerful manhood, and felt disappointed when his imaginary hero had dwindled down to the little, wiry old man before him. But then he reflected that great men were not always remarkable in physical development, and that giants in stature were not always giants in mind and power.

"Of all persons, Dakota Dan, you are the one I least expected to meet; although you are the person I most desire to see."

"Verily, Jonathan, I say unto you, I'm not a very admirable, prepossessin' old anatomical figger; neither is Patience, my mare here, nor Humility, my dorg thar; so you see it's not an overly great sight we be, now is it?"

"You misunderstand," replied Duncan; "it was not through curiosity that I desired to see you; but through a matter of business in which your services would be of incalculable value to me."

"Oh, that indeed? Wal, I reckon as what I, and Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, hev given ye a specimen of our 'possum, circumventing abilities. You see, we three all work together—man, hoof and howler, like the wheels of a klock, and when one don't run, the others all stop. We're a kind of a tri-angle, Jonathan, and right here let me say that it takes all three to make Dakota Dan. We've never failed in discomboboratin' a set of red-skins, now hev we, ole mare?—hev we, ole dorg? No, sir-eel! But I say, Jonathan, jist stand here till I git my proper riggin' on, then I can talk business to you; fur I'm act'ly sp'ilin' for a bloody muss with the red-skins. You see times got drefful dull up north, and I kem down here on purpose to raise a leetle pertickler thunder."

As he concluded, the ranger sprung nimbly from his animal's back and glided softly away into the woods. He was gone but a few minutes when he returned, rigged out in the full buck-skin garments of the veritable border-ranger, and carrying a fine-looking rifle, a brace of revolvers and a long hunting-knife buckled to his waist. He also carried a pair of saddle-bags, black and greasy with age and rough usage.

"Ah, one would hardly recognize the Oracle of Peace in the ranger, Dakota Dan," said Duncan, as he approached.

"You observe, Jonathan, I see'd the red devils arter ye, as I said before, and when I found out, by scoutin' around, that you were to be cooked, I resolved to save ye. So I went to thinkin'. I thought of them old clothes that I picked up at a trader's post up the Missouri; and so back I comes and puts 'em on; then I bound up Patience's leg in a piece of the old coat's linin', put a bug into her and Humility's ear, and the great triangle sot sail fur the Ingin camp. But they can hev the suit now, for it won't work ag'in, and then it ar'n't as strong as new, be it?"

"I rather think it's a little the worse of a century's wear," replied Duncan, disposed to make the best of his situation.

"But, Dan, do you think I had ought to keep this animal?"

"Abomination!" exclaimed Dan, half-surprised, half-vexed.

"Whar war ye born, man?—in a meetin'-house? Does yer conscience hurt ye? Do you want to take the stud back and

give it up to the smoked varlets and make apollygises for yer very ongentlemanly abstraction of the critter from their *corile*, while laborin' under a slight comboboration of the kranium? Ain't ye sorry ye didn't let 'em roast ye?"

"Not at all, Dan," replied Duncan, with a smile; "I was only afraid his being in our possession might get us into trouble."

"Red destruction, Jonathan! Stick to the std, for I warrant ye thar's not his ekel on all these prairies 'cept Patience, my mare here. He led the chase arter you; he's fast, he is, so stick to him. The varlets hev your hoss, so say to yerse'f, 'Jonathan Duncan traded hosses with the Incians; even, too.' Mebby that 'll clear yer conscience of its meetin'-house scruples. Dim it, man, you mustn't be too sticklin' 'bout right and wrong on the border when yer dealin' with red-skins. Keep all ye git, and git all ye kin if yer gettin' of the red-skins, that's law out here. But now, Jonathan, I'm ready to give ear to yer bisness."

"Well, to begin with, I'm lost. I aimed to strike the Keya Paha near its confluence, but got a little too far north, and into the clutches of the Indians."

"Ya-as," drawled the ranger. "I perceived the latter fact with half an eye, but it seems queer that you'd be trampin' over this ticklish kentry without a guide."

"I was told at the Missouri river settlement that I need apprehend no fears of the Indians in journeying across the country to the settlement on the Niobrara; that the savages were further north. I would have got through all right if I hadn't got lost. But to the business that brings me here."

"That's it, Jonathan, let it out."

"Well, really, I don't like to compromise myself too far unless I can be assured of your services," replied Duncan.

"I don't see but that Dakota Dan, the great triangular red-skin exterminator, can give you a boost, if the work is sich as what Patience, my mare here, can slap in a hoof now and then, and Humility, my dorg thar, stick in a tooth occasionally. We've got to pull together—we three, Jonathan, fur ye see it takes all three to make 'Dakota Dan.'

"Certainly—I understand," replied Duncan, "so I will state the case, then you can judge as to the amount of adventure connected with it. I am in search of a young person who is heir to a large fortune in one of the Southern States—"

"Gal or boy?" interrupted Dan.

"I declare I don't know which."

"Now you don't say, do you?" exclaimed the ranger. "Then how the blazes you goin' to find the heir if ye don't know whether it's gal or boy, dead or livin'? Leastwise it be the curiosest thing ever heard of, ar'n't it now?"

"It is a remarkable case," replied Duncan; "and I'll tell you how it all came about. The father of this unknown heir or heiress, Charles Lonsdale, died; two weeks after his death the mother also died in giving birth to the child. As soon as it was born, it was wrapped in a shawl and taken into an adjoining room by the mother's attendant—an old woman named Betsy Frone, who was not overly scrupulous in principle. Ten minutes later the babe was missing. Not a soul knew what had become of it. The old attendant said she had left it lying upon a pillow and went into another room for clothes to dress it. When she returned it was gone; and up to that time not a person in the house knew the sex of the child—the dying mother having drawn all but Frone to her bedside."

"Mortal destruction! you don't say, Jonathan? Poor thing, poor thing."

"It is probable that the matter would still be wrapt in more mystery than it is, had old Betsy Frone not been called upon to render up an account at the judgment bar of God."

"Served her right!" exclaimed the old ranger; glancing at

his mare and dog, as if to see the effect his decision produced upon them.

"She made a death-bed confession," continued Jonathan.

"She confessed that she aided in kidnapping the child—that, even before it was born, she had plotted with one Raymond Geer—a heartless villain who sought to add to the mother's bereavement and sorrow, and thereby seek revenge upon her for having rejected his love before she married Charles Lonsdale. Had he known, however, that the mother was not to live, he would doubtless not have stolen the child. Old Betsy confessed that she handed it out at the window to Geer, who was in waiting there. Then he spirited it away and placed it in the hands of the wife of an old boatman named Caleb Bond—one of Geer's own ilk in river piracy. Now, this kidnapping was done twenty years ago, and it was but two years ago that old Betsy Frone made this death-bed confession. The brother of the dead Charles Lonsdale, who took possession, or rather charge of his relative's estate, offered a large reward for the return of the child, with evidence to establish its parentage and birth, for, you see, old Caleb Bond, the boatman, had left the country with the child, long years before, and no one knew whither he had gone. But it was generally thought that he came West, and was in all probability living under an assumed name. Detectives have been looking the case up for two years, and a short time ago I got wind of a man answering the description of Bond, residing at, or in the immediate vicinity of, Niobrara settlement."

"Would you know ole Bond if you'd see him?" asked the ranger.

"No; I never saw him in my life."

"Then, if he's livin' under another name, how ye goin' to git at him? In course he won't confess he's Bond if ye can't prove it, for he'd be afraid of the law. No, sir-ee, he'll not implicate hisself."

"If I run across Bond, or any one I suspect of being Bond, and he has a son or daughter, or several of both, I hope to be able to identify the Lonsdale heir by its resemblance to either the father or mother—the latter in particular. Then I will have Bond arrested and indentified, and released upon condition that he makes a clean breast of all."

"Wal, now, Jonathan, you're on what I call a purty cold trail—one that Humility, my dorg thar, couldn't foller. They've been dead twenty years, ye say, and yet ye expect to be able to recognize the child by some resemblance to its father or mother, don't ye? S'pose it don't look a whit like either? You must hev a good remembrance, haven't ye?"

"I do not trust much to memory. I had a picture of Mrs. Lonsdale, and by it I had hoped to be enabled to sift out the matter."

"A cold trail, Jonathan; a monstrous cold trail—got the pictur now?"

"No; White Falcon took it while I was in his power."

"Then the last footprint in the trail's rubbed out, now ar'n't it?"

"No; I remember how the picture looks, and shall continue my search. I may recover the picture."

"Yes, ye may, and then ye mayn't, but—"

He was here interrupted by a low growl from Humility, and a glance at the dog told him that he had detected the presence of danger, and leaping upon the back of his mare, he said:

"Jonathan, thar's danger nigh. Humility, my dorg thar, says so, and he's never been known to bark up the wrong tree—never. Look, Jonathan! see the graceful arch of the dorg's neck, the cant of the head, the sparkle of the eye, the quiverin' of the dilated nostrils as they sniff the air—ah! ar'n't he a noble specimen of his race? But I reckon as what this vicinity isn't as healthy as possible; I reckon them smoky-skinned varmints are approachin', so let's skip along and talk on the run."

So saying, the two rode away, closely followed by Humility; but Dakota Dan had been mistaken for once in the source of the dog's uneasiness. They were scarcely out of hearing of the spot where they held their conversation, when the lithe figure of a white man, in Indian garb, glided from a clump of bushes hard by, and hurried away to meet White Falcon and his warriors, who were approaching over the plain at a sweeping gallop.

CHAPTER V.

EDITH AND RUBEN.

NIOBRARA settlement was located on the river of the same name, about ten miles above the mouth of the Keya Paha. It had been of a mushroom growth, springing up within one summer to a dozen dwellings and about fifty inhabitants, all told. The latter were all supposed to be honest, industrious and peaceable citizens, yet brave, hardy and fearless people, who represented various nationalities, as most border settlements usually do. No two families in the settlement knew each other, previous to their meeting at this point. They all seemed to have been thrown together, as it were, by mere chance; and they all mingled and associated with that free, kind, confiding and open-handed friendship that the true pioneer is wont to extend to a fellow-man. No one inquired of another's past life, nor called for letters of introduction, but forthwith received him into the brotherhood, there to test his moral character by his deeds. A rude exterior, to these unsophisticated bordermen, was not always indicative of the inner man. They judged a man's virtues by his own standard, and not by his fine clothes and prepossessing features.

Of such people was Niobrara composed, with but a single exception, of which we will speak more fully hereafter.

A day or two following the events narrated, two of the settlers—a man and woman, or rather a girl and boy—were seated side by side upon a fallen log, engaged in low conversation. Overhead the graceful cottonwood trees swayed and rustled in the September breeze; at their feet rolled the Niobrara river.

Ruben Gregg was the elder of the two, and he could not have been over twenty years of age. He was a tall, handsome, noble, manly-looking youth, whose dark-brown eyes, intellectual brow and expressive features were evidence of mental culture; and yet he was but an unsophisticated youth of the border—one of three boys, that had been born and bred upon the frontier, in the family of old Barak Gregg. Professionally, Ruben was a bee-hunter, in which business he excelled all competitors. His father was a gunsmith, or worked at the trade when he was sober enough to be intrusted with a job.

Barak Gregg was the only intemperate character in the settlement. It was evident, too, that he had always led a life of dissipation; and it was with a feeling of regret that the neighbors saw Harvey and David, his two youngest sons, and brothers of Ruben, following slowly, but surely, in his footsteps. And they often wondered why Ruben was so different from his father and brothers. Some thought he was possessed of his mother's nature—kind and gentle and loving, always striving to do good and keep within the path of right and duty.

Edith Dufford, the maiden who sat by Ruben's side, may have been a year his junior. She was one of those bright and happy little creatures whom all loved, and whose coming brought sunshine and joy to the saddest heart. Dark-brown hair crowned her head of classical mold; dark, soft blue eyes, that sparkled with girlish mischief and joy, sent their sweet,

mesmeric influence to your very heart; and red, ruby lips danced over pearly teeth to the musical sweetness of her own voice.

Edith was an orphan. She had never known the love of a father or a mother. She had lived in her uncle Amos Hammerly's family, ever since she could recollect any thing. They were as kind to her as their own children, but she was proud-spirited and could not shake off a feeling of dependence upon her uncle's charity. She loved Ruben Gregg, and Ruben Gregg loved her; but the dissolute life of his father came up between them—the sins of the father were visited upon the son. Edith's uncle would not consent to their union, although he liked Ruben and treated him kindly. But he also loved his niece, and was afraid Ruben would yet inherit the dissipation of his father. He knew Ruben was young and that his character for life was not altogether molded. His fatherly interest in Edith was fully reciprocated by the maiden. Her love and respect for him were so deep and lasting that she would not oppose his wishes, nor disregard his advice. He and his family were the only relatives she had in the world, and should she cast them off, and then Ruben prove untrue to her, her life and happiness would be forever wrecked.

"No, Ruben," the maiden sadly said, in reply to his earnest request for some definite answer as to their future life, "I cannot give you an answer yet. I love you, Ruben, as I have often acknowledged to you before, but I cannot act against the will of uncle Hammersly. You know he opposes our union on account of your father. He has no objections to you now, but he is afraid of the future. He is afraid your future character will be fashioned after that of your father; and advises me to wait at least until your habits have become fixed by the lapse of time."

"Then he is not opposed to our union altogether?" said Ruben, a ray of hope kindling in his fine eye.

"No; but he thinks we are both young, and may change our minds regarding each other, as we grow more mature with years. So, Ruben, you would not insist on me acting contrary to his wishes, would you?"

"Never, dear Edith," replied the youth, passionately; "an undutiful daughter would not make a dutiful wife. I feel that I am possessed of too much manhood to advise one that I love to do wrong. I will wait for you ten years, Edith, before I will do wrong. I will convince your uncle that my habits and character at thirty are the same that they were at twenty; and that I am fully worthy of his niece, though I be the son of a drunkard."

"Oh, dear Ruben," said Edith, happily, as she lifted her soft blue eyes to his, "it pleases me so, makes me so happy to hear you say this."

"Henceforth, then, dear Edith, I shall know what I have to strive for—your hand, as I am sure your heart is mine. I was going away with the bee-hunters up the river, to be gone two or three weeks perhaps, and I just thought it would be a relief, as well as a pleasure, to know what my fate was to be. Now I can go with a light heart and clear mind."

"I pray you will be careful, Ruben, and get into no danger while you are gone. They say the Sioux are on the war-path, up on the Keya Paha."

"I have heard it so reported, but I do not give credit to the rumor, Edith. The Yankton Sioux are a lazy, shiftless tribe, and are not likely to take the war-path, unless incited to do so by the renegade whites that find a harbor from the law in the Indian strongholds. White Falcon, however, is unscrupulous enough, and has the power to lay waste all southern Dakota. Still I apprehend no danger whatever. What reports we have heard may have originated in connection with the story that Dakota Dan is up the Keya Paha, slaying the red-skins right and left. It may be true, but I hardly think that noted ranger is there."

"Will Mr. Searle go with the bee hunters?" asked Edith, reflectively.

"He proposes to accompany us to the mouth of the Keya Paha, and there leave us, and strike across the country to the fort. He has been trying to induce us to change our field of operation, and go up the Keya Paha instead of the Niobrara. In case we will do so, he will spend a few days with us. Bee-hunting is real lively work, and as Mr. Searle is fond of sport, he is anxious that we should change to the Keya Paha, and I am in favor of it, for I regard him as a true gentleman in the strictest sense of the word."

"If you knew what I do, perhaps you would not think so much of him, Ruben."

"Why, my dear girl, do you know aught against the character of Mr. Searle?"

Edith laughed in a clear, musical tone, for she saw that Ruben was surprised and confused. Her little brown hand crept shyly into his, and, lifting her blue eyes, she said:

"He asked me just this morning for permission to come to see me."

"Is that all?" replied Ruben, and Edith saw that he started slightly, and that a flush swept over his face; "I am sure it was a compliment, for Mr. Searle could have no evil motive in wishing to pay his respects to you. But I feel certain, however, notwithstanding his regards for you and your admiration of him, that he can not win your love from me."

"You have great confidence in me, then, Ruben?" the maiden queried, joyfully.

"I have all confidence in the world in you, Edith."

"And I in you, Ruben."

There followed a moment of silence, sweet, rapturous silence, in which the sympathetic flow of love from heart to heart held holy, speechless communion.

Ruben was the first to break the happy silence.

"My dear girl, I had nearly forgotten that I was to be ready to start with the men from Davidson's half an hour ago. The moments have passed rapidly—they always do when I am with you, dear Edie. But I will have to leave you now."

"When do you expect to return, Ruben?"

"I can't say certain; we may be gone three weeks—two at least."

"May your excursion be one of pleasure and success, and free from dangers. Oh, how uneasy I shall be till you get back! But I will pray for you, Ruben, as I always do when you are in danger. I feel certain my prayers have been answered more than once."

"God bless you, my little love!" Ruben replied, fervently; then he stooped and imprinted a kiss upon her red, warm lips.

They lingered a moment longer, as if it was painful to part, but the blast of a horn suddenly aroused Ruben from his blissful lingering. It was the signal for the men to assemble. So they parted, Ruben going down to Davidson's cabin where the men were assembling, equipped for the bee-hunting excursion up the river, while Edith turned and started for her home up the river.

She had gone but a short distance when she turned and cast a farewell glance at the retreating form of her lover. The latter seemed actuated by the same motive of love, for Ruben gazed back at the same instant. He waved her an adieu; she kissed her fingers to him, then turned and bounded away like a fawn. Out of breath, she finally sat down to rest. Her little brown fingers were toying with the strings of her hat, while her eyes were fixed upon the ground in a kind of mental abstraction.

Suddenly a shadow crossed her path, a footstep sounded near.

She raised her eyes; a little cry of surprise escaped her lips.

A man stood before her; it was Mr. Ishmael Searle, one of the government commissioners lately sent out to investigate the standing of the Indian department of Dakota.

He was a man of some thirty years, was tall and well formed, with dark eyes, dark-brown hair and beard, and a pleasant and rather prepossessing countenance. He was dressed in a citizen's suit of dark-gray cloth, wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, and carried a heavy cane, with a silver ferrule and gold dragon-head.

He saw that Edith was startled by his sudden appearance, but put her at ease by speaking first.

"You must excuse my rudeness, Miss Dufford," he said, apologetically, "in running onto you without warning."

"You are excusable, Mr. Searle," replied Edith, with a confused smile. "It was unintentional on your part, of course."

"It was, it is, yet it is just such a blunder as I am always making in the presence of ladies. I admit I am wanting in manners, which accounts for my lack of success in winning the regards of the opposite sex, I suppose."

"You do yourself injustice, Mr. Searle," Edith responded, in a pleasant tone. "It is probably all owing to your want of appreciation of the sex, that the lack of success of which you speak may be attributed."

"Not at all, Miss Dufford. I like the ladies and their society, but they all appear to be afraid of me. Even you, yourself, Miss Dufford, have declined to allow me to call on you."

"I felt justified in my course, Mr. Searle," Edith replied.

"I suppose, then, you have an admirer."

Edith blushed, but the telltale color soon vanished.

"Did I say so?" she replied.

"No, but I simply judge so. A young woman with your face, character and disposition is seldom without a lover. But it is a proverbial saying that faint heart never won fair lady, and so I thought you would not be offended if I asked the favor of you which I did, even if you were under engagements."

"Certainly not, Mr. Searle."

"Well, although you did not grant my favor, I am going to live in hopes yet, Miss Dufford. Perhaps a better acquaintance between us will induce you to rescind your negative answer."

"It never will, Mr. Searle," replied Edith, a deep earnestness in her look and voice.

"Is this the case, Edith?" he asked, sadly.

"It is, Mr. Searle," she replied, in a tone that precluded further questioning on the subject.

Searle bit his lip; he appeared to be struggling hard with himself to keep back an impassioned appeal that was struggling up into his throat for expression. He gazed vaguely down the river, crossed his hands over his cane, and sighed bitterly. Finally he said, in a tone a little unnatural:

"Well, I presume the bee-hunters are ready to start, and are waiting for me. I will not detain you longer, Edith. Good-by."

And with a polite bow and wave of the hand which seemed half in mockery, he continued on down the river, his head bowed as if in deep thought.

Under the shadows of a branching tree he stopped, took something from his pocket, and having gazed at it for fully a minute, returned it to its receptacle and moved slowly on.

Edith went home, but she was not as light-hearted as when she parted with Ruben Gregg. Her interview with Searle had filled her mind with some vague apprehensions of dis-

trust that she could not dismiss. Why it was she could not tell. She had no reason for such feelings, and could account for them on no other theory than that of an intuitive presentiment of something yet to come—something concealed behind the impenetrable veil of the future.

CHAPTER VI.

FRIENDS IN DANGER.

DAKOTA DAN and Jonathan Duncan turned almost due southward after they had journeyed a mile or more into the woods, and had made sure they were not being pursued. They soon reached the banks of the Keya Paha, and drew rein.

"Now which way?" queried Jonathan.

"We must cross here," replied Dan, "and give the varlets the slip by goin' back down the river on yan side."

"Can we ford the river here?" asked Duncan.

"Our hosses can swim if they can't wade. Patience, my mare here, is a perfect duck to swim, and Humility, my dorg thar, can swim on his back like a sick fish. Foller me, Jonathan."

The ranger rode down the bank and into the river, and without the least difficulty succeeded in reaching the opposite shore. Duncan followed, and in a few minutes more they were moving down the river, having first fallen back into the woods.

They rode in a walk and picked their way along where their animals' hoofs would be least liable to sink in the soft mold of the woods.

"Dan, do you think this *detour* will throw the red-skins off our trail altogether?"

"Oh, Judas, no; in course it won't; but then it will give 'em a plaguy site of botheration. Then they'll smell a rat and be keerful how they fool with Dakota Dan, the great jumpin', kickin', chawin' triangle of the Nor'-west. We'll not be so easy next time, Jonathan; and when we git sot agoin' with knife, hoof and tooth, we can make an abominable ugly sight, us three can. Ye see, don't ye, that we can't play the Oracle, lame hoss and good dorggy enny more? We're known now, and 'll hev to depend entirely onto our muscle."

"I presume the red-skins will not be fooled the second time," replied Jonathan.

"Judas, no, in course they won't."

The two rode on for an hour, when the sun went down and the shadows of evening began to gather. Dan suggested a halt for the night to rest themselves and overworked beasts. Duncan was not altogether in favor of stopping, but, being assured that no danger would befall them, he yielded to the wishes of the ranger. Dismounting, they tethered their animals out in a little glade hard by, where the rich grass grew abundant.

The two men took up their quarters under the thick, low branches of a cottonwood tree. The weather being warm and pleasant, they were not compelled to make a fire and thereby publish to savage eyes their location. In his saddle-bags Dan had an ample supply of dried venison and jerked buffalo-meat, which he at once furnished to Duncan and Humility.

"This yere, Jonathan, are real, downright hunter-life in earnest," remarked the old ranger, throwing himself back against the tree with a knife in one hand and a chunk of venison in the other. "But I reckon as what ye arn't had much in your'n, hev ye?"

"Not much; nor do I care about it, either, if what I had to-day is a specimen of border life," replied Duncan.

"That war a clus fix, Jonathan, and it's likely the smoky varlets would assisted ye outen the world but for one little sarcumstance of a very amusin' nature."

"That was, I presume, about as close quarters as a man generally gets into."

"It war a pesky tight place, but then I've been in a 'tarnal sight wusser fix nor that, Jonathan, and if it hadn't 'a' bin for my presence of mind, I'd 'a' bin bait long ago for the Missouri piscatorial inhabitants—to be sure I wculd."

"Then your adventure was by water?"

"It was, Jonathan, and I hope I may never kill another Ingin if it arn't so."

"Well, I haven't disputed your word yet, for you haven't told the story."

"Well, sir, Jonathan, it's an actel fact. I went over the falls of the Missouri in a canoe, two years ago, and never got a scratch."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Jonathan.

"Yes, sir, no lyin'; ye see, I war canoein' it down the river, when, all to onces, a lively yelpin' on each side of the river told me what war up. The cussed Blackfeet had got arter me, and war on both sides of me, then a dozen in canoes war arter me. The falls war before me—not a mile away. Escape right or left or back'ard onto the bagonets of the varlets war not to be thought of, so I thought I'd try scootin' over the falls, and pulled out."

Here Dan stopped to cut off a slice of venison and give Jonathan an opportunity to put in a period, but the latter said nothing, and so the ranger went on:

"Lord, Jonathan, when that canoe got within twenty yards of the falls, it frisked around, give one flirt and over it shot like all destruction."

"And you escaped unharmed?"

"Oh, I got wet, to be sure I did; but it war all ownin' to my presence of mind that I got off as I did. Ye see, don't ye, while I war goin' down the falls, the canoe left me, for, ye see, I had the thought to grab at the great curtain of water and kind o' steady myself. Dogged if I didn't hang right up thar to that water fur some time, but rightin' myself, I slid down the falls, and as luck 'd have it, I fell plump, smack, right into my canoe below, and went on down the crick, whistlin' 'Hail Columby' as though nothin' 'd happened. But that wa'n't my wust scrape, Jon—"

An outburst of laughter from Duncan interrupted the ranger.

"That was a remarkable adventure, Dan?"

"It was, now wa'n't it? But, Jonathan, if you've enny desire to take a nap to-night, you can turn in whenever ye feel like it. The ground makes a good bed, the darkness abundance of kiver. Humility, my dorg thar, will see to it that no harm comes to our bedside."

"A few hours' sleep," said Jonathan, "will make us all the more vigorous for the morrow's journey."

Darkness had long since overspread the land. The stars were twinkling brightly in the heavens. The moon came up and cast a somber, dreamy light over all. The forest loomed up grim and unnatural against the sky. The river murmured close by. A tree-frog began its harsh piping in the tree overhead—a cricket chirruped in an old log hard by. These were followed soon by those mysterious voices of the night-enshrouded wilderness that resembled the distant moan of a storm.

Dan and Duncan stretched themselves upon the earth, with their heads pillow'd upon their arms. The monotonous song of the wilderness, the solemn voices of the night, soon lulled them to sleep. They slept soundly for hours. Dan was finally aroused by his dog licking his cheek. He started drowsily up, rubbed his eyes, gazed at the dog and then up at the sky. The moon's position in the heavens told the noon of night.

The dog whined and sniffed the air.

Dan started to his feet, clasped his rifle, and peered into the gloomy shadows around him.

Duncan stirred restlessly in his sleep, beat the air with his hands, as if fighting an imaginary foe.

Dan chuckled to himself over his friend's restlessness.

Again Humility sniffed the air, and whined in a low, plaintive tone.

Dan bent his head and listened. Only the heavy respiration of Duncan and the murmur of the Keya Paha broke the foreboding silence of the midnight hour.

"What is it, ole dorg? what is it?" Dan said, stooping and laying his hand upon the dog's head.

Humility thrust his nose up into his master's bearded face, then frisked away into the woods toward the glade where they had tied their horses out to grass.

Master and servant, man and dog, seemed to understand perfectly the language peculiar to each other. Their long associations together had combined the language of human reason and animal instinct.

"Thar's deviltry goin' on," mused the ranger. "Them abominable smoky heathens must be around."

Thus musing he advanced and waked Jonathan Duncan.

"Humility, my dorg thar, p'ints danger, Jonathan," he said.

"Indeed!" and Duncan sprung to his feet.

Then Humility came bounding back to his master's side, and at once disappeared again in the direction of the glade.

"Sumthin's wrong 'bout the hosses, Jonathan," the ranger said, deliberately; "let's feel the sitewashin with care."

With extreme silence they crept to the edge of the glade.

"Oh, ho! thar's what's up!" whispered the scout, as he glanced out into the opening that was flooded with moonlight.

Duncan parted the bushes before him and took in the scene at a glance. An Indian warrior had crept up to the horses and was just unfastening the old ranger's mare.

"Shoot the thief before he gets away with your mare, Dan," he said, somewhat excited.

"No, keep mum, Jonathan, and we'll see some fun. You'll see the ole mare demonstrate her teachin', now mind."

The Indian unfastened the mare, then turned, and half-crouching, attempted to lead her away into the darkness of the woods. But he suddenly met with a difficulty unexpected. The mare threw herself back and obstinately refused to budge an inch. The Indian pulled on the lariat one way, and Patience pulled the other.

The Indian soon grew tired of this, as delay was dangerous, and so he tied up the lariat and mounted upon the mare's back and dug his heels into her side. The animal sprung backward instead of forward, nearly unseating the warrior. Again the latter applied heel and whip, but Patience still refused to go. She shook herself in a violent manner, reared upon her hind feet in endeavor to dismount her rider in every way possible. But her efforts so far had been in vain. The Indian was an expert horseman, and clung to her like a leech, and with a desperate pertinacity worthy of success.

Dakota Dan calmly viewed the scene, his face convulsed and his sides shaking with laughter.

"Ar'n't that jolly, Jonathan?" he asked every now and then, nudging Duncan, who was both surprised and amused at the exhibition of equine perversity and savage determination.

Finding herself unable to dislodge the savage, Patience, as a last resort, suddenly dropped herself upon the ground, and began rolling as though a swarm of bees had settled upon her. The Indian was forced to yield up his seat and retreat beyond the mare's flying limbs. He stopped and awaited her movements, regarding her all the while with a puzzled, thoughtful look.

Finally the mare rose to her feet, and looking toward the Indian, whinnied, in a manner that seemed expressive of triumph to Dan and Jonathan. But the Indian must have taken it as indicative of quiet submission, for he immediately started toward her with an expression of satisfaction and triumph upon his grim, stoical face. No sooner, however, was he within reach of the animal, than she whirled suddenly round and drove her heels into his stomach with such violence that he was thrown heavily to earth. The ranger and his companion watched to see him rise to his feet, but to their surprise he never moved nor uttered a word nor sound.

"I reckon as what, Jonathan," the ranger said, "that crabbed ole critter has bu'sted the life outen that lopin' varlet. But then it's not the fust time she's slapped her flippers into a red-skin's bread-basket and sent him a-flukin' to the happy huntin'-ground. She's jist like all females—contrary as sin, and cross as a sick b'ar, but then she's a noble critter. That varlet's dead, Jonathan, but to make sure and certain, I'll jist step out and 'zamine his pulse."

He entered the glade and advanced toward the motionless figure of the savage that lay doubled up on the earth where he had fallen. He reached the body and was bending over it, when his attention was suddenly arrested by a noise in the shrubbery close by. It was a noise not unlike that which would be made by a heavy body crashing through the undergrowth. It was approaching the glade—coming nearer and nearer. Before Dan could have time to decide upon his course of action, two figures, locked in each other's deadly embrace, came whirling in rapid evolutions out of the darkness into the moonlit opening!

CHAPTER VII.

WHITE FALCON IN A RAGE.

We left White Falcon fuming with impotent rage, and pouring the most horrible execrations upon the two savages that had deserted their post, and permitted Duncan and the dog Humility to escape. The loss of the prisoner, however, would not have been of so much consequence to the chief had his horse not been taken away. He knew there was nothing on the Keya Paha equal to him in speed and endurance, and so he knew it would be useless to make any extra exertion to recapture the prisoner.

The Indians, however, soon found his trail; then the chief mounted Duncan's jaded horse and set off up the stream at a slow pace, a guide preceding them on foot, his head bent forward like a hound's, and his snake-like eyes fixed on the fugitive's trail.

The chief's exasperation increased with the lapse of time. He was continually reminded of the loss of his pony by the exertions required to goad on the fagged and worn horse he now bestrode; he would have shot the two savage guards who were responsible for his loss, had it not occurred to his mind every minute that, being the leader of the party, he was the greatest dupe in it, for having allowed the Oracle to practice the imposition upon them that he did.

The appearance of a figure on the plain in advance suddenly arrested the attention of the savages, and drew the chief's thoughts from his grievances. He immediately ordered a halt to make a survey of the surrounding vicinity, for it occurred to him quite forcibly that he might be running into some trap, which was but a continuance of the Oracle's cunning deception.

The object, which at first was intangible, gradually assumed the form and proportions of a man. He was coming directly toward the savages, and as he drew nearer, they recognized

him as one of their own friends—a half-breed called Sulky, who had been left behind in the chase after Duncan by the death of his horse.

White Falcon at once spurred forward and met the man.

"Ho, Sulky!" he exclaimed, as he drew rein, "did you see any thing of two men just now riding north?"

"I reckon I did, boss," replied Sulky, a villainous-looking fellow, whose countenance accorded with his name.

White Falcon dismounted.

"Where were they, and how long since you saw them?" he questioned.

"In the tim'er up thar, and long enough ago for 'em to be up on the Powder. If it are 'em yer arter, ye mout es well go back, fur one of them war on yer stud and t'other'n was—well, did ye know who the t'other'n war, boss?"

"Some infernal old fool of a trapper or hunter."

"Jist rite yer are, boss," responded the half-breed, with a knowing air; "it war that identikel ole ranger from up north that—"

"Not Dakota Dan?" interrupted the chief.

"Yes, Dakota Dan," said Sulky.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed White Falcon, manifesting great surprise and uneasiness; "that old rag'muslin Dakota Dan? How do you know this, Sulky? Speak out, man."

"Why, weren't I hid not ten steps from whar him and that feller what we chased stopped to talk? And didn't I hear every word they sed? And didn't that 'ere queer-lookin' ole kritter say he war Dakota Dan? I reckon now he did, boss."

"Dakota Dan!" repeated the chief, reflectively; "if that man has come down here, and we have got to deal with him, we'd better pull up stakes and emigrate to a climate more congenial to health and growing scalps."

"But you ort to heard what they said, boss. It war good, I tell ye—money in it," said Sulky.

"Then you heard, did you?"

"To be sure I did. How could I help it, when I sot within a rod of them in the bushes? But Lor', I war mortal afeard that o'ney-lookin' cur o' the'r'n 'd scent me out."

"Well, what did they say?"

"The feller that we chased did all the talkin' nearly. He talked 'bout a child he war in s'arch of. He said it war an heir to a big pile o' cash somewhar; but the footy didn't know whether it war a gal or a boy. He said the chile war stolen by an or'ney sneak-thief a few minits arter it war born, and no one of its friends knows its sex. But a rascallion of an old woman, who helped the feller that he called Geer—"

"Geer?" exclaimed White Falcon, as if startled by a clap of thunder from the clear blue dome of the heavens above—"did he say Geer, Sulky? Raymond Geer?"

"That's ther very handle, boss, he give. Raymund Geer. You must know sumthin' 'bout him, the way ye look, ole feller."

The chief made no reply. He became deeply absorbed in thought. His eyes sought the ground; he passed his hand nervously over his brow, as if to aid in recalling to memory some half-forgotten incident of the past. Sulky saw his perturbation of mind, and in hopes of supplying the missing link to his clouded memory, he continued:

"He said he war huntin' fur that heir or heiress, and that sumin' had writ to him to look 'bout the Niobrara settlemint. He said you took a pictur from him that war a likeness o' the mother o' the child, be it gal or boy."

Again White Falcon started. He had not thought of the picture since placing it in his pocket. He took it out and gazed at the pretty, fair face therein. A light of recognition beamed in his gray eyes, and something like a sigh escaped

his lips. It was something like a sigh that would come of a sudden sting of remorse, though the chief's friends had long since decided that his heart was incapable of human feeling.

"Fool that I have been," he finally exclaimed, as he began pacing to and fro, his head bowed in the deepest thought; "why didn't I recognize her face before?—the face of her whom I once actually loved, and whose rejecting of my love made me what I am.

"Taken in time, I might have forced the secret from Jonathan Duncan's lips, and would have done it had we not been a set of fools and given heed to that accursed old Oracle. Raymond Geer! Man of sin and misfortune! What a life has been yours! And who is Raymond Geer?—ah, my own guilty conscience answers you, White Falcon, *alias* Donald Gray. You are the man that took the child from old dame Frone's hands, and carried it away, and gave it into the keeping of the wife of Caleb Bond, the boatman; you did it all to crush the heart of her who rejected your love, a heart that even then lay cold in death—insensible to joy or sorrow. But, let me see; it has been nearly twenty years since I did the inhuman crime, of which I have not thought in the past five years, so busy has been my life of wickedness and adventure. But, fool that I was, I never thought to inquire what the sex of the child was, and, as God's my judge, I don't know to this day whether it is a girl or boy, or whether it exists at all. In fact, I never saw old Frone, nor Mrs. Bond, nor the child, after that night's work. For, its mother dying, I had no further vengeance to feed, and so I left that country forever. But now, after twenty years, the matter comes straight home to me. Old Betsy Frone in dying confessed her sin; an uncle offers a reward for the lost heir. Surely the millennium has come, else that uncle can not inherit the estate himself. Well, Jonathan Duncan is in search of that heir or heiress. I am almost positive now it is a girl, and that she resides at Niobrara settlement, and is known by the name of Edith Dufford. I have seen that girl once or twice, and I thought then that there was something strangely familiar about her face, but I was too busy in other work to give her a second thought. The instant, however, that I saw this picture to-day, I remarked the great resemblance between it and Edith Dufford; and, let me see—yes, by heavens, fool that I was again, I told Duncan then that I knew where I could lay my hand on the counterpart of this picture. But I will strike at once for Niobrara. I shall look into the matter, and if Edith Dufford is the daughter of Martha Lonsdale, I swear by Heaven that the sins of the parents shall be visited upon the child."

This mental resolution appeared to afford the heartless villain some relief, and in a measure compensated him for his recent losses. Turning, he mounted his horse and headed toward Niobrara settlement, followed by his warriors.

He had journeyed but a short distance, when a thought seemed to have struck him quite forcibly. He drew rein, and addressed his warriors thus:

"Braves of the Yankton Sioux, Dakota Dan and Jonathan Duncan must not be allowed to escape alive. Let half of my followers turn back—take up the trail of the two white men, and never sleep till their scalps hang at your girdles."

This order was accepted with a shout of approbation. The division was soon effected, and the two parties separated upon their respective journeys.

CHAPTER VIII.

JONATHAN A WANDERER.

We left Dakota Dan and Jonathan Duncan in the forest glade, startled by the two figures that came crashing from the undergrowth into view. The ranger strained his sight

in the dim moonlight, endeavoring to make out the two forms, that at times seemed incorporated into one. So rapid were their movements, that the eye could scarcely follow them; but suddenly an angry growl proclaimed the truth—it was the dog, Humility, and a savage. The latter had locked his arms around the animal and was hugging his shaggy form to his own, so that the brute could not exert his full and terrible power upon him.

The dog had his fangs buried in the naked shoulder of the red skin, but the desperate hug of the latter prevented him from changing his hold to a more vital part. Dan finally saw the situation of the combatants, and drawing his knife, started to the dog's assistance. But, at the same instant, something clutched him by the legs, and he was thrown to the earth. He saw a figure rise above him; it was the figure of the supposed dead savage—the victim of Patience's heels. The next instant he was engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter.

Jonathan Duncan rushed to the ranger's assistance, but the combatants whirled away across the glade into the darkness so rapidly, that he dare not strike for fear Dakota would prove the victim. He turned to help the dog through with his adversary, hoping the animal would render his master the aid that he could not. But his assistance was not required. Already the dog had his foe by the throat. The savage's eyes were protruding from their sockets and the bloody froth stood upon his lips and oozed from his nostrils. Feebly and harmlessly the fingers of the doomed warrior clutched and tore in spasmodic efforts at the form of the beast; but finally he ceased to struggle at all; he became motionless; a convulsive straightening of the form—a quiver of the muscles of the face, and all was over.

Then Duncan called the dog off, and started to the assistance of the ranger. But where was he? Jonathan stopped and listened. He heard a loud splash in the river—a floundering in the water. The combatants had rolled into the Keya Paha!

Like an arrow, Humility lanced away into the gloom of the woods in the direction of the river, and Jonathan followed him.

A cry suddenly rent the air. It was an Indian cry. Other warriors were approaching. Duncan could already hear Humility, a few paces away, engaged with one of them. He could hear the others coming on through the undergrowth, and, cognizant of his peril, he bent his course to the right and hurried down the river a short distance. Concealing himself, he gazed up the river in hopes of seeing Dan. He saw that the hitherto placid bosom of the river was agitated and turbulent. Tiny waves chafed the shore at his feet. But nowhere upon the bosom of the river could he see either of the combatants. He could hear no sound indicative of the struggle still going on, but what the result of the conflict had been he knew not. He dare not call to the ranger, for he knew it would bring a dozen warriors upon him.

Satisfied that he could render the ranger no assistance, Duncan hurried back to the glade, and turning Dan's mare loose, mounted his own animal and rode away, scarcely knowing whither he went. He moved on; the moon went down; the sky became clouded, and the forest wrapped in Egyptian gloom. Suddenly Duncan found himself bewildered. He knew not where, nor in what direction he was going. He stopped and waited for daylight, but this brought no relief. Not far away he discovered a party of savages encamped on a little knoll. He could leave his covert of shrubbery in no direction without being seen by the foe. He waited for darkness to make his escape. When it at last came he set forth; but the difficulty of the previous night again befell him. He became bewildered, and was compelled to wait for daylight. When day was again ushered in, he set out on his journey,

all the while subsisting entirely upon wild fruits that grew in the forest.

The third night following that of his separation from Dakota Dan, set in. Clouds, black and ominous, drifted across the brow of the heavens, shutting out the starlight. Not a voice could be heard in the forest; a deep, deathly silence pervaded the night.

Jonathan rode on; the night advanced. Suddenly the scream of a panther echoed through the forest aisles. A wolf answered back in mournful symphony. Duncan shuddered; to his suffering and privations, the horrors of night added new persecutions and dangers; but suddenly, through the dismal gloom, he caught the glimmer of a light. Hope sprung up anew in his breast, and he spurred on his half-jaded beast, never dreaming but that the light proceeded from the camp-fire of friends.

Suddenly he came to a halt. The camp-fire was not far away, but the Keya Paha rolled between.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FEMALE CAPTIVES—THE DEAD UPON THE BEACH.

THE bee-hunters had been gone one day from Niobrara settlement. Every thing at the village had gone quietly forward in its old accustomed track, though the young men were greatly missed. It made the settlers realize more fully their own feeble strength and the inadequacy of their power, should the Indians swoop down upon them.

None felt more lonely, anxious and uneasy than did Edith Dufford. She was not so uneasy about her own safety nor that of Niobrara as she was of Ruben's. The former were not even threatened, as she was aware of, while her lover was going straight into the midst of dangers.

On the day following that of her lover's departure she, in company with a spinster lady of some thirty years, went to visit a friend nearly a mile from the settlement. It was nearly sunset when they took their departure for home. Their course lay along a cow-path leading from the village to the plain, and running through a narrow belt of timber that shut the village from their view.

They were walking along in silence when Mehitable Van Fleet, Edith's companion, remarked:

"Law sakes alive, child, why don't you say sumthin'?" She said it all in a single breath, for Miss Mehitable was one of those persons who could talk along for minutes in the same unvarying strain, apparently all in one breath. She could not pride herself on her beauty, for she was very plain-featured. She was an avowed man-hater, but this dislike may have originated through a want of appreciation on the part of the men during her young girlhood days. Mehitable also had a tongue and temper of her own, and never let an opportunity pass when she could make good use of them, for they worked better when both were in action.

"I was thinking, aunt Mehitable," replied Edith.

"Bless my soul alive, you are always thinkin'!" rattled Mehitable; "and I dare say that boy Rube Gregg is the subject of it all."

"Yes; I was just wondering if he was safe, aunty"—the young folks always called her aunty.

"Safe?" replied the spinster, with a disdainful toss of the head and curl of the lip; "bless my soul, the world'd be better off a blessed sight if there weren't a man in it."

"You don't think so, now; I know you don't, aunty. You like the men, but hate to let it be known, now don't you?"

"Mer-cy, Edith Dufford!" exclaimed Mehitable, elevating her hands, as if in horror; "I could just switch you good, you little rascal. Me, Mehitable Van Fleet, like the men!

Well, that is a good joke—I declare to nature it is; but there's not a word of truth in it. Why, bless you, girl, I could 'a' married forty times if I'd a bin a mind to."

Edith laughed and moved on; she had no desire to argue the matter with Mehitable. They entered the narrow belt of timber heretofore mentioned, and were proceeding briskly along when two figures sprung out of a clump of bushes that fringed the path, and confronted them.

Both were Indians, hideous in war-paint. A dark, evil and sinister smile rested upon the sensual face of each.

The women screamed and turned to flee. Heavy hands seized them rudely and detained them. Edith grew pale and speechless with terror, while Mehitable grew enraged and opened a tirade of abuse and vindictive threats upon her captor, at the same time plying her nails and teeth in a manner that for a while promised her the best of the situation. But the brute strength of the savage finally overpowered her, and her hands were bound at her back.

"Oh, Lord in heaven!" she cried, her eyes snapping fire, and her face the picture of fury and rage; "you red, horrid heathens, it's a good thing you've tied my hands, or I'd scratch your daggery, wolfish eyes outen your consarned heads! I'd streak your nasty, dirty, greasy faces wusser than they be—yes, I'd tear your very liver pins out! Shame on you, you great, loafing vagabonds, skeering the life out of two young, helpless girls!"

"Hoah!" exclaimed one of the savages, "you much young girl in wisdom—heap old in wrinkles and ugly face."

"Oh, salvation! If I only had the use of my finger-nails I'd scratch you gray, you dirty wretch! Purty things, aren't you? Skeering us outen our wits!"

"I am inclined to think," said one of the savages, in plain English, that told that he was a white man in disguise, "that you never had any wit; think it all run to tigerosity and wild-catism."

"Taunt, you great, horrid lummix! taunt two helpless women now that you've got them tied. Brave, gallant fellows you are—worthy of the names of Indian warriors and—I'll scream my eyes out if you don't let me loose!"

The disguised renegade laughed at the enraged spinster in a manner that served to provoke her anger. Finally he said, touching the handle of his tomahawk:

"See here, you are both to go with us, and that quietly, too. If you persist in keeping that tongue of yours wagging in a manner to alarm the whole country, I will bury this tomahawk in your old brain."

"I'll scream if you kill me; I'll have my say—I'll have my last word if the heavens fall upon us—I'll—"

"Bind this over the ranting jade's mouth, Sulky," said the renegade—who was none other than White Falcon himself—handing his companion a large yellow handkerchief which had fallen from Mehitable's shoulders in her scuffle with the half-breed.

With some difficulty Sulky succeeded in binding Mehitable; then the two women were conducted to where four horses were hitched and several mounted Indians were in waiting. The captives were then mounted upon two of the animals, and at once conducted away northward by their savage captors. By the time they had cleared the woods and gained the open prairie beyond, it was dusk. Far back behind them the captives could see lights twinkling in the cabins of the settlement, and their hearts sunk within them as they thought of the dear homes and friends they were leaving behind for a fate no doubt worse than death. They knew they would be missed, of course, but it would be daylight ere their friends would discover their capture; then they would be many miles away.

The party plunged into the prairie and rode at a furious pace. Both Edith and Mehitable were excellent equestri-

ennes, and although their captivity weighed heavily upon their hearts, the ride was cool and invigorating to the body if not the mind.

Mehitable's gag had been removed, but the swiftness of their gait took her breath whenever she opened her mouth to "scream her eyes out." Edith sat sad and silent. Her thoughts went back to her home, and then away off up the Niobrara, to her lover, Ruben Gregg. She thought over their peril; she believed their capture had been the result of a matured and preconcerted plot, that was to be carried into effect as soon as the bee-hunters had departed from the settlement.

Darkness finally wrapped the plain in its somber shadows. One by one the stars came out. By and-by the moon drifted slowly into view, bathing the plain in its mellow, shimmering light, and rendering objects weird and unnatural.

Still on over the plain thundered the grim, painted and plumed warriors with their fair, white captives, only the "swish" of the grass and the pounding of the horses' feet upon the plain breaking the silence of the night.

At length they came to where another party of savages had made a temporary halt. It was evidently a relay-party, for the chief stopped only long enough to change horses.

Continuing on for long, weary hours, they finally drew rein upon the banks of the glimmering Keya Paha. Here all dismounted. The horses were given into charge of several warriors, while White Falcon, the half-breed Sulky, and a savage called Black Crow, conducted the two captives down to the edge of the water. Sulky drew a large canoe from under some bushes. It had evidently been placed there for that express occasion, for the women were hurried aboard of it, and all embarked for up the river.

The half-breed and red-skin propelled the canoe, each being provided with a paddle, while the chief kept ward and watch over the two desponding captives.

The latter sat locked in each other's embrace, Edith shedding scalding tears and sobbing as if her heart would break; while Mehitable, by turns, poured words of hope and consolation intended for her, and words of vindictive rage intended for their captors, into her ears.

Slowly the moon rode into the heavens, crossed the zenith and declined westward. Shadows finally began to creep out from the shore and mantle the bosom of the river.

The dip of the paddles, the swash of the waves, the labored breathing of the paddlers, with now and then the startling scream of a night-hawk, the screech of an owl, or the croak of a bull-frog, were the only sounds that disturbed the profound stillness of the night.

The canoe labored on and on. Sadder and sadder grew the hearts of the captives as the distance between them and home grew longer. Edith watched the shores in hopes of seeing some friend or friends in pursuit. But vain hope—only the purple shadows hovered, assassin-like, along the shores.

Suddenly a deep, heavy sound came thrilling out upon the still night, and echoed far away through the valley of the Keya Paha. The savages ceased their labor; the canoe stood still; all listened intently. From away down the river came the deep baying of some animal.

"A timber-wolf," said Sulky.

White Falcon shook his head. He was sure it was not a wolf, but a dog, and his thoughts at once reverted to the ranger, Dakota Dan. He grew uneasy and counseled greater speed—the savage and half-breed dipped their paddles and the canoe glided forward, fairly leaping under the strokes of the flashing blades.

A ray of hope beamed in the breasts of the captives. The source of their captors' fears was a source of encouragement and promise to their dejected spirits.

They journeyed on nearly a mile further, when Mehitable suddenly felt Edith's form convulsed with a violent shudder. She saw that the maiden's eyes were fixed upon the water, and permitting her own gaze to be drawn in that direction, she, too, started with a shudder. She was just in time to see the cause of Edith's emotions. It was a human face—a thin, rough-bearded face, with a great, gory wound across the right cheek, that floated past them within arm's length almost. Masses of tangled hair floated around the strange brow and face that bore the seal of death upon it. It was a horrifying object, and sent a chill of terror to the hearts of the captives; and, although it soon passed from sight of the eye, it still haunted the mind like the vision of a fearful dream.

Singular as it may seem, the dead face escaped the eyes of the savages. Their attention was fixed upon the shores and the river far ahead or behind.

A hundred sad, mental questions arose in Edith's mind regarding the face of the dead, unknelled stranger. Was some fond wife or child, or friend, waiting and watching in vain for the coming of the dear face that was then staring upward from the waters of the Keya Paha into the ghostly moonlight? Or was he some friendless trapper, fallen by the wayside, unmourned and unnoticed by all save Him that notes even the sparrow's fall?

Edith's reflections were suddenly interrupted by the deep, mournful howl of a dog a short distance in advance of them. At this point the timber receded from the shore, and the moonbeams were permitted to fall unobstructed on the whole river, excepting a narrow border along the west shore. A few rods in advance of the canoe was a little sandbar, whose margin was fringed with short aquatic plants and slimy reeds. Upon this island the savages beheld a dog seated upon his haunches, with his nose thrust upward in the air, while howl after howl, deep and mournful, and filled almost with human sorrowing, trembled forth from his lips.

Again the canoe was permitted to come to a stand, and with bated breath and distended eyes the occupants watched the dog. Ever and anon the animal would cease its wailing howls, bend its head and sniff around a dark object stretched before it upon the sand—only to break forth again in a more dismal refrain.

The savages turned to White Falcon, an interrogative look upon their faces.

"We must move carefully," the chief said, with a dubious shake of the head. "That's Dakota Dan's dog, if I mistake not, and he may be trying to come the Oracle over us again. Have your weapons at hand for instant use, then move on carefully. There is something lying before the dog that looks like the body of a man. Perhaps the boys overtook that infernal ranger and that man Duncan, and have played fun with their calculations, and that dog is whining over his master's old carcass? So if this is the case, it wasn't the ranger's dog we heard down the river. Creep on carefully, and the first form that moves besides the dog's will get a bullet right through it."

The canoe slowly and silently crept onward, and in a few minutes it came alongside of the sandbar and stopped.

A cry of horror escaped the lips of the party, for a fearful sight met the eyes of all. A man dressed in the water-soaked garments of a hunter lay motionless in death upon the edge of the bar. His legs and right hand and arm were still submerged in the water, the dog having been unable to pull him entirely out. His hair was wet and draggled with sand and dirt, and clung in scraggy locks about his face and neck. Green, slimy moss was washed in among his hair and beard, and draped his shoulders and limbs in horrible festoonery. His left arm lay partially doubled under the body. The chin

was thrown backward, the mouth open, the lips drawn tightly over the white teeth, and the half-closed eyes staring heavenward. Upon the cheek was a deep wound, extending nearly across the side of the face, though not serious enough of itself to have produced death.

The form and face was that of Dakota Dan, the ranger!

White Falcon and his warriors recognized it as the face of the old Oracle—the animal as his dog Humility.

The captives gave the repulsive object a glance, and both at once felt positive that it was the same face, with the same gory wound upon it, that they had seen floating on the water far down the river.

"Oho!" ejaculated White Falcon, "the old Oracle of Peace, Dakota Dan, has met his fate. The boys must have done it for him, but they haven't got his scalp. See that it is secured, Black Crow."

The dog cowered down by the lifeless form of his master, licked the wound upon his cheek, then sent forth a howl of distress so deep and mournful that it touched the heart of the captives with pity, and brought tears of sympathy to their eyes.

Black Crow sprung out onto the Island, and with kicks and scolds attempted to drive the poor, dumb brute away, but he cowered still closer to the form of his beloved dead, and a howl as if of human agony issued from his lips when the savage drew his scalping-knife, placed his foot upon the breast of the prostrate ranger, and stooped to tear the scalp from his head!

CHAPTER X.

A SUDDEN TURN OF AFFAIRS.

EDITH and Mehitable turned their eyes away to shut out the horrible, inhuman act of scalping the dead, and pressed their hands upon their ears that they might not hear the keen, glittering blade tearing across the old man's head.

With an air of triumph the savage stooped and twined his fingers in the wet, draggled locks of the ranger. The knife was descending to do its cruel, mutilating work, when the hitherto motionless form stirred, and something like a hiss escaped his lips. A shaggy form shot through the air, and the next instant Black Crow felt Humility's fangs tearing into the quivering muscles and tendons of his throat.

With a shout that would have done credit to a pair of brazen lungs, Dakota Dan leaped to his feet. In the hand that had lain submerged in the water he clutched a long hunting-knife.

White Falcon reached for the revolver in his girdle, but to his surprise and horror it was gone. Mehitable had, with great presence of mind, lifted it from his belt while his attention was drawn elsewhere, and dropped it overboard.

One leap and Dakota Dan was in the canoe—one blow and Sulky received the deadly knife in his heart, and sunk a quivering, lifeless mass in the canoe. Dan turned to confront the third enemy, White Falcon. But that worthy was beyond the reach of the ranger's arm. The chief, comprehending his situation in a moment, sprung from the canoe into the river and swam ashore, and gained the shelter of the woods.

Edith Dufford had fallen in a swoon at the beginning of the conflict, while Mehitable, with her hands clasped over her breast, sat swaying to and fro like a reed in the wind, uttering a series of hysterical screams.

Dan lifted the form of the dead half-breed from the bottom of the boat where he had fallen, and consigned it to a watery grave; then turning to Miss Van Fleet, said:

"There now, woman, ye needn't scream like a painter. The hull thing's over with, ar'n't it? Hain't hurt, be you?"

"Ho-oh, Lord, no-oh!" replied Mehitable, speaking and screaming in the same breath.

"Then if you could put a quietus to yer vocal appendage, I'd advise it as bein' mortal congenial to yer health, as redskins are not overly scarce in this yer vicinity. See to it that yer friend's not dead while I pull this 'ere canoe into the shadder of the shore."

The ranger called Humility into the canoe, then took up the paddle and turned the craft toward the darkest shore of the river.

Mehitable soon brought Edith out of her swoon, and when the maiden had learned that she was safe—had been rescued by a friend, she poured words of joy and thanks upon the head of her deliverer.

"Lor' bless me, chile," said the old ranger, his eyes kindling with joy, and his whole face beaming with admiration, "it makes my ole heart feel good to hear sich words from sich lips. It's been a long time since these ears hev heard maiden lips praise the deeds of Dakota Dan."

"Dakota Dan!" exclaimed the fair Edith, in surprise; "are you Dakota Dan, the ranger?"

"Yes, ma'am, I be, what the cussed—I mean—excuse me, gals—what the pesky varlets hev left of me."

"Oh, aunty! then we can feel safe with this good, kind ranger of whom we have heard so much."

"His being a man 's all the objection I've got to him," replied Mehitable, with a sigh.

"Ye don't like men, then?" said Dan. "Ar'n't married, be ye?"

"No, I am not, and that's not the worst of it—I never will be as long as Mehitable Van Fleet knowsherself!" retorted the spinster.

"Whar do you live, gals?" asked Dan.

"At Niobrara settlement."

"Indeed! When war ye kaptered?"

"Just about dusk to-night."

"Wal, wal, it war lucky I war hereabouts. I'll see that ye're keered fur, gals. This yer's Humility, my dorg, what knows more'n a million Ingins do; and he can be substantially relied onto with safety. Judas! didn't he lay it on fine as chief mourner over his marster up to the sand-bar? He's a lovely, sagacious dorg, gals! He seems to see and know what I think, and 't 'd do yer soul good to hear him talkin' dog talk. He's most awful sorry 'bout this wound on my cheek."

"It is a serious-looking wound, Dakota Dan," said Edith.

"Yes, it's a 'tarnal big leak—gallons of good blood spilt out thar—the hull Keya Paha's half blood, and bin on the raise ever sense I got that cut. I'm gorin' to tie it up purty soon, I swar I am. Ye see we got into a skirmish awhile ago up the river in the water, and the red nigger handled his knife so mortal slow that it got in the way and cut that mountain pass. But ye can bet yer giz—I mean yer purty eyes, fur ye see I'm not used to wimin society and don't alers speak the most dictionary words. I used to be a purty good skollar—knowed every letter from a to izzard, and wa'n't no slouch at readin' and cipherin' and sich; but I've got most awful rusty and ye mustn't git mad at me, gals, if I say rough words. But—but I've lost my subject. Let me see—oh, thunder, yas. I war goin' to say I give the red-skin, what cut this ditch on my face, a settler atwixt the ribs that numbered him among the dead. Then fur fear a pack of red hashints war watchin' me to come out of the water to grab me, I jist flopped over on my back and floated off down the river, and Judea!—I passed right under yer very noses and ye didn't see me."

"Not much you didn't pass under my nose unseen, Mr. Dakota Daniel," replied Mehitable, as fast as she could talk;

"fur 1 and Edith see'd you, and thought you were dead as a door-nail, and half 'composed."

"It's a mortal wonder yer didn't scream, ole woman," said the ranger, not altogether pleased with Mehitable's volubility of tongue.

"Call me old, do you? You'd better look to home you—"

"Aunty, aunty!" interrupted Edith, in a gentle, rebuking tone; "don't forget that we owe our escape to Dakota Dan, and are yet dependent upon his protection and guidance; we must not bring him into trouble by loud and useless talking."

"No man can git the better of me a-talking, as long as my name is Mehitable Van Fleet. I'll scream my eyes out before I give up to let a *man* have the last word. I'm going to enjoy the freedom of speech for which our forefathers fit and died on Bunker's Hill. I'm a woman, Edith, and Dakota Daniel should court my—my friendship, 'stead of me coketting to him."

This vehement declaration was made in the absence of Dakota Dan, who leaped ashore to seek a landing for the maiden and spinster.

He soon returned, and running the canoe to the point selected, assisted the women ashore and conducted them away into the forest. When they had journeyed nearly a mile, Dan ordered a halt, when he uttered a succession of peculiar whistles, much to the wonder and surprise of the two females.

A few minutes of silence followed the ranger's call, then a heavy trampling, as of hoofed feet, was heard approaching through the undergrowth.

"What is it, Dan?" questioned Edith, in a low, soft tone, slightly agitated with fear.

"Oh, Lord sakes, the Ingins are coming!" cried Mehitable, swinging her hands in despair.

"Yer mistaken, Miss Fas'talker," replied Dan; "lookey thar—that's what it is."

A riderless horse made its appearance from the darkness of the woods, and approached Dan with a low whinny.

"This, ladies, are my mare, Patience," said the ranger; "both she and my dorg Humility know more'n a dictionary-maker. Patience, my mare here, comes of mortal good blood—good as ever kicked the daylights outen an Arab; and Humility, my dorg thar, is as good as ever scratched gravel off'n an Alpine peak, or dug snow for a St. Bernard monk. I swear by them critters, gals, for their like never was; why, I could trace their pedigree cl'ar back to Noah and the ark!"

"Tel hel hel!" laughed Mehitable, nudging Edith, "what a tongue that man's got—a perfect ole woman to gabble, ain't he?"

The ranger patted his mare and fondled his dog in a manner that manifested his great affection for them; and his fond caresses were received with a mute expression of animal intelligence and joy.

Finally the ranger turned to the women, and said:

"Gals, I'm goin' to leave you here with my mare and dorg, and go arter my rifle. I'll be back soon; ye needn't have any fears."

As he concluded, the old ranger glided away into the shadows. He was gone but a few minutes, returning with the weapon he had gone in search of in his possession.

"Now I'm myse'f ag'in, gals. I've got my tools all together—Patience, my mare here, Humility, my dorg thar, and ole Jerk'emstiff, my rifle here. I'm ready to sail out fur tall timmer and Niobrara, and I want you two female wemin o ride Patience, my mare here, fur ye can never do the walkin' that's afore ye."

"But that will be depriving you of your animal, besides overtaxing it with a double burden," said Edith.

"Judas, little un', how you talk!" blurted the ranger. "Patience is my mare's name, and Patience is her nature. She'd carry a mountain if it could sit on her back and she war strong enough. But she is mortal p'isen on a red-skin, she is—just kicks the daylights smack smooth outen them; now, if ye'll jist step this way, I'll boost ye up onto her back, and we'll be off fur other quarters."

The women yielded to the ranger's request, and permitted themselves to be assisted upon Patience's back. Then Dan gave Mehitable, who rode in front, the reins, and the party set off. The old ranger took the lead and Humility brought up the rear.

They journeyed on for a couple of hours, when, to the joy of all, they beheld the first streaks of the morning dawn shooting aslant the eastern sky. One by one the stars faded from view—the moon sunk from sight, and at length the golden bars of light, trembling along the eastern horizon, burst into flame.

The broad glare of the morning sun was upon them, diffusing its warmth and brightness into the very souls of the fugitives.

The birds came forth and sung their morning carols overhead. Squirrels frisked and chattered upon the trees, and a myriad of wings that had lain dormant during the night now flashed in the cool, balmy air of early morn, that was fragrant with the perfumes of the wildwood—the great wildwood where, but a few hours before, darkness hung like a pall, and death and terror stalked abroad.

CHAPTER XI.

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS.

DAKOTA DAN followed the downward course of the Keya Paha, and as soon as the day had been fully ushered in he ordered a halt for a few minutes' rest, and to partake of a meager repast from the remnants of dried venison in his saddle-bags.

Before sitting down to eat, however, Dan went down to the river and made a thorough ablution, arranged his hair, redressed the wound upon his cheek, and in every manner improved his appearance so greatly that the females could scarcely believe he was the same person.

"I declare to goodness gracious, man!" exclaimed Mehitable, struck by the change effected by his toilet, "you look more like a man than ever, now."

"Aunt Mehitable!" said Edith, reprovingly.

"I'm not handsome, I know, gals," the ranger replied, "no, not even at the best; and if I'm awk'ard and rude in speech, you must jist consider that it's my nater croppin' out. I mean well, gals, I do, I sw'ar. You see Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar, are all the companions Ihev for months at a stretch sometimes, and a feller will git a leetle slouchy talkin' hoss and dorg... But now, ladies, jist lay hold on this 'ere venison and eat hearty. We've a long tramp ahead of us, and you've got to hev sumthin' to lean on—I mean to strengthen you; so jist take hold and do yer dooty."

The females helped themselves to the venison, which the ranger cut up into thin slices and placed before them. They were not hungry, for the fears and excitements of the night had kept them up, but they eat more out of respect for Dan's noble generosity than from actual want. They endeavored to show a due appreciation of all his acts of kindness and close attention; for they saw it pleased him greatly.

When their repast was finished, the journey was resumed. They had traveled but a short distance when Humility began to manifest alarm. Dan ordered a halt, and at once began a reconnoissance of the surrounding vicinity. He discovered

two white men coming up the river toward them. One of them he readily recognized as Jonathan Duncan, the friend from whom he had been separated three nights before. The other was a stranger to him, but Mehitable and Edith at once recognized him as Tom Hobart, one of the Niobrara settlers who had left the village with the bee-hunters.

The meeting was one of the greatest surprise and pleasure, especially to Dan and Jonathan, who, owing to the circumstances under which they had been separated, mourned each other as dead.

In a few seconds Mehitable spun off to young Hobart the story of their capture and subsequent rescue by Dakota Dan. In the mean time Jonathan and the old ranger were comparing notes. Each narrated the trying ordeal through which he had passed, Jonathan closing the epitomizing of events with the joyous news that he had struck the camp of the bee-hunters, which was but a few miles down the river.

Edith Dufford's heart leaped with joy at this announcement. She but a few miles from Ruben, her boy-lover! The thought was a joyous one. It brought the color back into her face, the luster into her eyes, and the wonted music into her voice.

The journey was again resumed, Duncan and Hobart turning back with the fugitives. Hobart and the females went on before, Jonathan and Dan bringing up the rear. Each party was out of hearing of the other, and with those in advance the conversation finally turned upon Jonathan Duncan.

"I don't like him, Edith," Mehitable said, with a look intended to give vigor to her tone.

"Why not, Miss Van Fleet?" asked Tom Hobart.

"Because he looks at Edith so curious, just as though he'd look a dagger into her heart."

"I noticed his regards, myself, Mehitable, though I thought nothing of it at the time," replied Edith.

"I deem Mr. Duncan a perfect gentleman, Edith," said Hobart, "and if he regarded you with an unusual want of modesty, it was doubtless done through surprise or admiration."

"He's just like all the men," asseverated Mehitable.

In the mean time the following conversation was going on between Jonathan and the ranger:

"I am now almost satisfied, Dan," Duncan continued, in connection with the discussion of their late adventures, "that everything has turned out for the best, for I do believe I have found the lost heir of the Lonsdale legacy."

"You don't say, now, do you, Jonathan?" replied Dan, apparently astonished.

"As near as I can remember, the face in the picture, taken from me by White Falcon and his minions, is the very image of that maiden riding yonder whom you called Edith Dufford."

"You don't say, do you, Jonathan?"

"Yes, I am sure she is the person that I am searching for. And I believe, as much as I live, that White Falcon has remarked the resemblance between the girl and picture, and from the clue furnished him by that note he also robbed me of, he has sent his Indians to capture that girl in hopes of accomplishing something by it. He may possibly know more of the matter than I am aware of; however, I am satisfied he mistrusts all I have surmised. As soon as we reach the camp of the bee-hunters, and the women have been rested, I shall approach Miss Dufford on the subject."

"You really believe she's the gal, do ye?"

"I am almost positive of the fact; though, after all, she may know nothing of her parentage nor her past life. The matter, however, can be sifted out; and it will be, I assure you, friend Dan, if we ever get out of this abominable country alive."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BEE-HUNTER.

It had been the intention of the bee-hunters that left Niobrara settlement to go up the Niobrara river, and in fact they had started in that direction; but by the earnest solicitation of Ishmael Searle, the government commissioner, they were subsequently induced to change their minds and go up the Keya Paha. This change in their course had been decided upon before they reached the mouth of the last-mentioned stream, consequently no time was lost. It required a day, and half of the following night, to reach the field where they could begin operations; when they did, they went into a temporary encampment till the following morning.

Being skilled bordermen, and fully aware of their surrounding dangers, their first consideration was a camping-place where they would not be exposed to the sudden attacks of savages, should any, bent on mischief, happen that way. The point selected for this purpose was a small island in the Keya Paha. But as even this was within range of either shore, it was necessary that some sort of a barricade be constructed, and the men at once set about the work. Being provided with axes, they cut a number of long, slender logs along the river-bank, rolled them into the stream and floated them to the island, notched the ends and laid them in a double wall six feet high. The space between the two walls was then filled in with stone and sand, thus making an almost impregnable defense.

Nothing in the way of bee-hunting was done that day, but on the following morning five of the party were armed and equipped for a half day's hunting, leaving five at the island to guard the camp—they to take the field in the afternoon.

Among those who went out were Ruben Gregg and Ishmael Searle, the government commissioner. On gaining the shore every man took a different course. Each was provided with a small tin cup partially filled with honeycomb, and a small bottle filled with clear honey. These were the tools of the bee-hunters, though many other articles could have been used to advantage had they possessed them.

Ruben Gregg was a professional bee-hunter, devoting most of his time to this occupation. He knew the nature of the *wild bee*—his habits and peculiarities; and so he did not set his bait as soon as he gained the woods, as most of his companions did. He had obvious reasons for this: he knew there were bees in abundance along the river, but they were there for water, and would not return directly to their hives on quenching their thirst, but in all probability go in an opposite direction, in search of flowers or something that yielded sweets.

The youth pushed on far into the woods, and finally seated himself upon a fallen log. By his side he placed a piece of honeycomb, and filled a few of its cells from honey in the bottle. He had only to await now the coming of a bee. He did not grow restless nor impatient, for he knew that patience was one of the attributes of a successful bee-hunter. He passed the moments in reflection. Naturally enough, his thoughts went back to Edith and the settlement. Would he have remained so passive had he known of the dangers through which his sweetheart had passed since he last saw her? or that, at that very moment, she and Dakota Dan were lodged in safety at the camp he had just left?

The buzzing of an insect near his head suddenly arrested the youth's train of thought; and glancing down at his side, he saw, to his eminent delight, a bee settle down upon his bait. Taking off his cap, he imprisoned the bee and bait under it, pressing the edge of the cap down so as to exclude every particle of light. He held it in this position some time, and when he finally removed it, he discovered the bee half buried in one of the honeyed cells. While in darkness, it had been led to believe that it was in its own hive, and had set

to filling itself with the nectared sweets of the cell. Ruben waited until it had filled itself, and when it emerged from the cell and found open daylight around, it arose slowly upward, circled around as if to mark the spot, then darted away in a straight line northward. The trained eye of the young bee-hunter was enabled to follow it some distance; and as it disappeared from sight, a smile of satisfaction lighted up his youthful face.

"A pretty good 'line,' I am sure," he mused; "but here is another bee — two, three of them."

Sure enough, three more bees had settled upon the bait, and Ruben at once imprisoned them under his cap. When he removed the covering, he found the bees busy in the cells of the comb; but, one by one they came out, rose up, and having circling around the spot, flew away. Two of them went in the same direction as the first one, and the other in an opposite course.

Ruben arose, secured his bait, and started away to 'line' the course taken by the three insects. He moved quite rapidly for some distance, when he slackened his speed and began searching for his bee-tree.

Experience had taught him that the wild bee usually made its hive as high from the ground as possible; and that the eye alone could not be depended on entirely, as the light of the insects or the dense foliage concealed them from view, as they passed in and out of their hive. As their homes are always made in a hollow tree, the bee-hunter first selects a tree whose outward appearance bears evidence of inward defect. Then he makes the circuit of the tree, glancing carefully along the body for the entrance of the hive. If failing in discovering any hole, he places his ear against the trunk of the tree, and if the bees are active, and his sense of hearing is acute, he can generally hear a dull, buzzing sound vibrate along the body of the tree.

Ruben finally came across a large tree whose lower parts showed signs of inward decay, but the foliage was so dense that he made no attempt to test its secrets by the eye, but at once applied his ear to the body of the tree. He started, and a cry of delight burst from his lips. Up among the foliage he could hear the buzzing of myriads of wings distinctly. He could not see the bees, however; nor was he positive that they were in the tree under which he stood. There were other large trees standing near, and even mingled their boughs with those of the one first selected, and should he make a mistake in the tree, as he was liable to do when depending entirely upon the ear, it would cause a great deal of confusion and unnecessary labor when it came to securing the honey. To determine this, the youth extended his search still further. A novice would have become discouraged with half the pains already expended by young Gregg; but the youth felt amply rewarded for his pains, when, upon searching among the moss and leaves for other evidence of the true bee-tree, he found a number of dead bees, some small bits of honeycomb, and other matter usually expunged from the hive of an active and healthy colony of bees.

Being satisfied now that the tree under which he stood was the right one, Ruben walked out a few paces from its trunk and circled around and around it, until he finally discovered the place where the bees entered the hive. He now made a survey of the surrounding vicinity in order to familiarize himself with the locality and select the best place to fall the tree. As this was usually done after night, when convenient to camp, it was highly necessary that the hunter make all his calculations so there would be no delay, nor trouble of lodging one tree in another.

The youth having thus made his calculations, took out his knife and cut a perpendicular gash in the bark of the tree on the side on which it was to be fallen. Under this he cut his own private mark, so that other hunters could not lay claim to the tree and its treasure.

His day's work thus completed, he started on his return to camp.

A low, soft, meaning whistle, suddenly arrested his attention. He stopped and gazed around. He caught sight of the figure of a man standing half concealed in a clump of shrubbery not far away. At the same instant he saw the man's arm sweep through the air—he heard something come clipping through the leaves—something blurred his vision, and with a groan he sunk unconscious to the earth—stricken down by the hand of a hidden foe!

CHAPTER XIII.

A REVELATION.

THE sun stood upon its noontide meridian, and poured his warm rays down upon the glimmering bosom of the Keya Paha and the camp of the bee-hunters.

Eager, expectant eyes watched either shore from the little barricade, expecting each moment the return of the five hunters that had gone out in the morning.

Soon they began to drop in one by one until four had come. Ruben Gregg was still absent. An hour went by and he came not. Grave fears for his safety were now being written upon every face; and there was one pair of watchful eyes in the camp that filled with tears—a pair of lips that quivered with some deep emotion. These were Edith Dufford's.

Soon after the departure of the five bee-hunters in the morning, Dakota Dan, Jonathan Duncan, Edith and Mehitable were safely lodged in the camp of their friends.

Edith's heart beat joyously in the expectation of meeting Ruben. The time and circumstances under which she anticipated their meeting, would be a happy and joyous surprise to him. She was bitterly disappointed, however, when on arriving at the island, she learned that he had departed but a few minutes previous. With all the impatience and anxiety of youth she watched the sun creep slowly up the heavens. It seemed to her as though noon would never come, and that at times the sun stood still. But at length the hour for her lover's return came, and when the others came in and he did not, her heart grew sad with disappointment and fear.

Dakota Dan had astonished the bee-hunters with the intelligence that a large party of Sioux were in the vicinity, and upon the war-path with a vengeance. And had the party all been present at the time, measures would have been taken for an immediate return to the settlement.

In fact, those at the camp talked the matter over, and resolved, with the concurrence of the others, to return home as soon as the party came in. But the non-appearance of Ruben defeated all their calculations. They would not go off without him, or knowledge of his fate.

So they waited until he had sufficient time to get around, in case he was not in trouble, or had ventured further away than had been consistent with the time allotted him, and not having made his appearance, parties were sent out in various directions in search of him—Dakota Dan and his dog Humility being the first to leave the fort.

The afternoon was passed wearily, uneasily and anxiously enough at the island. To Edith, the uncertainty that hung over the life of her lover became almost agony itself.

Ishmael Searle, the commissioner, excused himself from partaking in the search for Ruben, upon the grounds of his ignorance of the lore of the border. As he could make a full hand, however, in defending the place, he felt that he would be no incumbrance there, and so decided to remain.

He saw that Edith was in trouble about Ruben, and endeavored to console her grief without compromising a knowl-

edge of the source of her sadness. But Edith had little to say to him, or to any one, in fact.

It was evident to the observing Jonathan Duncan that Ishmael Searle was enamored with the maiden, and was endeavoring to draw her aside that he might engage in private conversation with her. At the same time, it was also evident that Edith managed to evade the commissioner, as if she anticipated his object.

Duncan himself had also proved a source of annoyance and uneasiness to Edith, nor was he entirely ignorant of the fact. He had, quite frequently, permitted himself to be caught studying her features in a solicitous manner. He was trying to compare the features of the maiden with those of the picture taken from him by White Falcon; and the longer he gazed at her the stronger became his conviction that she was the child of the Lonsdales.

During the afternoon, he gained the opportunity to say:

"I beg you will pardon my seeming want of manners, Miss Dufford, in staring you out of countenance. But, if you will give me a minute's private conversation, I will explain why I have done so, and may tell you something to your advantage."

Edith breathed freer now; she granted the interview, and walked with Duncan to the opposite side of the little fort.

"First, I wish to inquire, Miss Dufford, whether or not your parents are living?"

Edith was surprised by the question. It was so different from what she had expected that she felt herself disappointed. She had hoped that he had something good to tell her of Ruben—or at least, some idea to advance regarding the youth's prolonged absence from the camp. In a tone that was indicative of her disappointment, she said:

"They are not living."

If Edith been looking at the man, she would have seen the corners of his mouth twitch, and a light of satisfaction and delight beaming in his eyes.

"Have you relatives living at Niobrara?" he questioned.

"I have an uncle," she replied, wondering whether she was committing herself in a manner that would some day bring her sorrow and trouble.

"Then you live with your uncle?" Duncan pursued.

"I do."

"Is he your father's or mother's brother?"

"Mother's."

"Is he an aged man?"

"He is about fifty, I believe."

"Was he a boatman on the — river before he came to Niobrara, or at any time in his life?"

"He may have been, though I can not answer for certain."

"What is your age?"

"Nineteen," Edith replied; "but I am sure," she continued, "I confess my ignorance of what you desire to learn, or find out, by questioning me concerning my friends."

"You will please pardon me, Miss Dufford, if I decline for the present to tell you more than this: I am searching for the lost heir or heiress of a large Eastern estate, and have thought, with good grounds for it, too, that you are the person I am looking after. However, I do not wish to compromise myself further, for fear the rightful individual, whoever that may be, would be defrauded, if the object of my search becomes publicly known. Still, I have every reason to believe, Miss Dufford, that you are the individual. If you will grant me another interview, after the trouble and uneasiness consequent upon the absence of the young bee-hunter is settled, I will make a detailed statement of facts to you. It is not probable that you can fully establish yourself without the concurrence of your uncle and aunt, as there are incidents—links in the great chain of evidence—which only they can supply."

A puzzled, reflective look settled upon Edith's face. In all her life she had never heard the slightest intimation of what Duncan had hinted to her; and but for the positive assurance of the man, the earnestness and honesty of his face and tone, she would have believed he was trying to deceive her for some purpose or other. Even as it was, she thought he was mistaken in the person he was in search of. She knew her uncle and aunt were honest people, and would keep nothing of her parentage concealed from her, through evil motives.

Having promised Duncan another interview, the two separated and mingled with the rest of the party.

Duncan assured himself that what had passed between him and Miss Dufford had been unheard by any but themselves inside of the little defense. But in this he was mistaken. The keen ear of Ishmael Searle had drunk in nearly every word of their conversation. And soon after the interview had ended, the commissioner was seized with a strong desire to go out and aid in the search for Ruben; and as no one urged any serious objections, he immediately took his departure.

"Lord!" exclaimed Jonathan, aside to young Hobart, "I wish Dakota Dan was here now. I'd have him follow Ishmael Searle to the end of the world!"

"Why so, Mr. Duncan?" asked Hobart.

"There's something wrong about that man."

"Do you wish to insult me, Jonathan Duncan?" Hobart asked, firing up with resentment. "Mr. Searle, sir, is a gentleman, and—"

The report of a firearm came through the woods, cutting short the conversation between Hobart and Duncan—calling their attention in the direction of the sound.

CHAPTER XIV.

DAN MAKES A DISCOVERY.

WHEN Dakota Dan and his dog left the island in search of Ruben Gregg, they moved briskly and silently away through the forest in the direction that Ruben was supposed to have taken.

The ranger had left his mare on the opposite side of the river, free to roam at will and feed upon the green herbage of the woods.

Dan was satisfied that the young bee-hunter had fallen into the hands of the Sioux, if he had not been shot down in the forest. As he proceeded along, the ranger kept his whole attention fixed upon the movements of his dog, which was allowed to precede him. He knew the keen scent of the dog would not fail, where his own sight would, in detecting the trail of the red-skins, were there any in the vicinity. In this he was right. As they moved along, the dog suddenly gave a low bark, then with his nose close to the earth he began frisking hither and thither, his body half-crouched upon the ground.

"Struck it, by Judea! arn't ye, old dorg?"

The dog looked toward his master and wagged his tail. Dan stopped and reconnoitered the surrounding vicinity, but could detect no sign of enemies about. He turned his attention to the movements of his dog. The animal had stopped and was sniffing around a certain spot in a manner that told Dan he was off the trail. Advancing to where he was the ranger saw the cause of Humility's queer actions. There was a pool of blood upon the ground and leaves, and this had deadened the scent of the animal and prevented him from following up the trail of the red-skin.

The blood was coagulated, although it had not been long shed, and a careful examination of the surroundings convinced him that it was the very spot where some person had fallen

under a blow. He found innumerable moccasin-tracks in the soft soil around the blood, and among these was the unmistakable imprint of a white man's booted foot. This surprised Dan. It was now evident to him that some white man, who had not discarded the footwear of civilization, had had a hand in the affair that shrouded Ruben's disappearance in mystery.

Dakota Dan was not the man to allow such a matter to pass idly. He carefully raked the old leaves aside in order that he could see more perfectly the shape and outline of the foot. He found it so plain and sharply defined that there was not a single doubt as to its exact size, and cutting a slender stick, he measured the length of the track, and its breadth; he charged his memory as to its shape, and made a mental calculation as to the probable heft of the man by the indentation of the foot.

This done, the ranger led his dog away from the blood, washed his muzzle at a little stream hard by, then circled the spot where the man had fallen until the dog again struck the trail of the departing red-skins. He knew, by frequent drops of blood along the way, that it was the trail of the party that had the wounded person in custody. But, to his surprise, he discovered that the booted foot was not among those of the red-skins. He shook his head dubiously, while a vague suspicion rushed across his mind—the suspicion that some of Ruben's own friends had been accessory to his murder, if murder it was.

He had followed the trail two or three miles when Humility suddenly came to a stop, and crouching his whole form upon the earth, glanced back at his master, then thrust his nose between his paws and moved his tail in a slow, serpent-like motion.

"By Judea! he p'ints danger; the game's in sight! Steady, now, ole Tri-angle."

He stepped aside and concealed himself in a dense clump of bushes, calling Humility to his side.

A few minutes later a white man came from the west and paused within a few paces of where Dan was concealed. It was Ishmael Searle, the government commissioner!

A few minutes later he was joined by the notorious renegade chief, White Falcon!

It was evident they had met by appointment.

Dan bent his head and heard Searle ask, as the chief drew nigh:

"Well, did you get him secured?"

"Yes, he's where he'll not be found soon again. He's come to his senses, and has quit bleeding. Lord! you must have given him a terrible jolt on the head. But how's matters at the island?"

"Complicated."

Dan ground his teeth and gripped his knife till the bones in his fingers fairly cracked.

"Dakota Dan and Jonathan Duncan, with the women, are there, as I told you before," the ranger heard the villain Searle continue. "I overheard Duncan talking with Edith, and he appeared to be pretty well satisfied that she is the right person. Dakota Dan is out looking for Gregg, as are others of the bee-hunters also. By keeping a close look-out, you may capture them; and every one killed or captured of course will weaken the defense of the island."

"To be sure it will," mused Dakota Dan.

"You can't kidnap the girl, then?" White Falcon asked.

"No," responded Searle. "I figured the question in every possible way, but there is no chance whatever. She is too closely guarded. The only hope lays in storming the defense. In that way we could get Duncan himself, perhaps; if so, we may force him to reveal all that would be of importance to us in this matter."

"Well, what then?" questioned Donald Gray.

"Then, if I cannot induce Edith to wed me, we can keep her in custody, and substitute an heiress that would favor our plans."

"That's so, Searle," replied the chief. "You are a deep one, Ishmael—as scheming as you are deceiving. Ha! ha! ha!—Ish Sorrel a government commissioner! That is a good one. What a set of blockheads them Niobrarians must be to let themselves be taken in by such a man in such a manner!.. But I'll bet you could keep it up all fall, and they wouldn't be any the wiser for it. They don't know more than the man in the moon who are agents and who are not."

Dakota Dan fingered his rifle nervously, and but for the presence of two score of savage warriors but a short distance away, he would have put an end to the existence of the two white fiends. As it was, he was compelled to forego all hostile demonstrations; but he felt amply repaid by what he had heard, and chuckled to himself in anticipation of what was to come.

"You're complimentary, Donald," Searle replied; "very complimentary. But see here: you keep your tools scouring the woods for those fellows that are now out, and I will return forthwith to the island and keep an eye and ear open for the programme of the bee-hunters. If I should have a voice in the proceedings, bet your life I'll make it to our advantage. That old Dan, however, is likely to be the chief spokesman and head-center of the party, and it will require great caution and skillful head-work to outwit him. But, as I was going to say, I will meet you to-night about the time the moon rises, at— Well, you say what point."

"You'll have to leave the island in a canoe, won't you?—well, then, drop right down the river, and I, with an escort of warriors, will meet you in a canoe in the middle of the stream, opposite the mouth of Rattlesnake creek. We can hold our conference there, certain that no prying ears will hear what is said. You want to make certain of the movements of the bee hunters; the strength of their camp; the location of the women's tent; and the most accessible point for an attack. Just so we get the girl and Duncan into our clutches, the latter dead or alive, is all we need trouble ourselves about."

"Well, then, let it be understood," replied Searle, "that we meet on the river about the hour the moon rises. I'll have to study up an excuse between now and then, in order to get away from the island without being suspected."

"Oh, that'll be no trouble for Ish Sorrel to do," replied Donald Gray, with a low, wicked laugh.

"Then again let it be understood that we meet at moonrise, on the river, opposite the mouth of Rattlesnake creek."

"Yes, at moonrise, opposite Rattlesnake mouth," repeated Gray.

"Jist so," mused the old ranger, rubbing his hands with delight and chuckling in glee; "jist so, my birds of Paradise. At moonrise, on the river, oppersite the Rattlesnake's mouth! Well, I'll admit I don't like rattlesnakes' mouths; but never mind; I'll meet ye thar, my brace of worthy wemin-stealin' cavaliers; bet yer gizzards on't, I will. Oh, yes! Dan-i-el Rackback 'll be thar, and onto his mussel, too."

Without further conversation the two plotters, Searle and Gray, separated, each one going his way

CHAPTER XV.

THE WATER SPY.

DAKOTA DAN spent most of the afternoon searching for Ruben Gregg, returning to camp about sunset. He was met by Edith Dufford, as he entered the little fort, to whom he

was compelled to impart the sad intelligence of the discoveries he had made regarding the fate of her lover. And yet he cheered her with words of hope and consolation that tended to drive away the total despondency that seemed to overwhelm her.

The ranger found that Ishmael Searle had preceded him to camp by several hours, and appeared as deeply affected by the unknown fate of Ruben as any one of the men. He was a consummate villain, and could put on an appearance to suit any occasion. However, he had his match in Dakota Dan in some respects. In narrating his discoveries in regard to the pool of blood, he said nothing of the boot-tracks, nor of anything that might arouse the suspicions of Searle. On the contrary, the ranger took sides with the villain in his views regarding the defense of the island, and further search for Ruben Gregg. Of course this was done to divert the attention of Searle from the object he—Dan—had in view, and throw him off his guard.

Before dark set in, however, Dan took the bee-hunters aside, along with Jonathan Duncan, and acquainted them with the character of their friend, the government commissioner; and the discoveries he had made, and the plots he had overheard. He then instructed them as to the course he intended to pursue, and in which he wanted their co-operation, in order to avert the doom that hung over the heads of the little band.

As soon as darkness fell, two guards were stationed on the opposite extremities of the island. They were to be relieved at midnight.

Dakota Dan had declared his intention of spending the night ashore in reconnoitering, although he seemed in no hurry about leaving the island.

Shortly before the moon came up, Ishmael Searle approached him and said:

"Dan, I believe we are in a predicament from which we cannot escape unaided, and I have made up my mind to start at once, under cover of this darkness, to Fort Randall for relief. What do you think about it?"

"A good ijee, Mr. Searle; I war jist thinkin' 'bout it myself," replied Dan. "If it wer'n't fur these wemin, we men could ruff it through; but ole Dan Rackback 'll shed barrels of blood afore harm shell come to them wemin. Yes, go, Searle, and tell 'em soldiers to buckle it down like thunder, for that's no tellin' how soon the Keya Paha 'll be full of deady smoky-skins."

"Do you think they will make an attack to-night?" questioned Searle.

"Don't think they will. They'll wait a day or two till they git reinforcements."

"Well, then, I shall depart at once," said Searle.

No one opposed the villain's pretended act of mercy, for by this time all were in the secret of his intentions.

While he was making preparations for departure and bidding all good-by, Dakota Dan disappeared from the island, leaving Humility at the fort.

Searle finally took his departure in a canoe toward the east shore, neglecting to take some one along to bring the canoe back.

The night was extremely dark. The sky had become suddenly overcast with a white mist, and dull, leaden-gray clouds came trooping up from the west like misshapen piratical crafts. The air was warm and sultry, and so vibrant that slight noises could be heard a long way off. The piping of the tree-frogs, the rasping croak of the bullfrogs, the dull hum of insects, and the mysterious winnowing of nocturnal wings—all these, to an experienced borderman, would have been a true prognostication of "falling weather."

The bosom of the Keya Paha was as black as that of the fabled Styx. Not an object could be seen upon it, and even

the ripple of the waves and their recoiling swash along the shore seemed muffled by the density of the gloom.

Ishmael Searle pulled rapidly toward the east shore, and when within a few paces of the bank, he headed his canoe down-stream and moved with extreme caution, for fear the diversion in his course would be discovered by those at the island. In fact, he was so very careful on this point that he lifted the paddle from the water, and concluded to let the canoe float at the will of the current until beyond all possible danger of being heard. But the boat drifted sluggishly through the water—as though the intense gloom acted as a resisting power—and he was compelled to use the paddle. When a few hundred yards below the island, however, he plied the ashen blade with all his strength, and glided along so rapidly that he was not aware of his proximity to the mouth of Rattlesnake creek until suddenly challenged by a voice which he recognized as that of the renegade, White Falcon.

The next moment the two villains ran their canoes alongside of each other, and at once entered into a low conversation which lasted several minutes.

When they separated, Searle returned toward the fort and White Falcon to the shore.

A few minutes later savage yells and the report of firearms rung along the river.

Ishmael Searle redoubled his exertions with the paddle, and sent his canoe rapidly forward. He soon reached the island in apparent excitement. He landed, tied up his canoe, and hurried inside of the little fortification.

He was scarcely over the wall, ere a dark object rose up from the water under the prow of the canoe just left by Searle. It was immediately followed by the head and shoulders of a man who stole ashore, then crept around to one of the guards, that was posted outside of the defense, and having made some change in clothing, entered the fort.

This man was Dakota Dan. He had been to the meeting of White Falcon and his accomplice, Searle; and he had gone there, clinging to the keel of Searle's canoe, his head being concealed under the flaring sides, or rim of the craft!

"Hello, Ishmael!" the ranger exclaimed, as he caught sight of the traitor, "didn't go to the fort, did ye? Redskins got arter ye, didn't they?"

"They did, Dan, and that with a vengeance, too," replied the lying scoundrel. "I had landed and was making my way—"

"A mortal sight of the abominable devils in the woods, arn't they?" interrupted the ranger. "Reckon they're hatchin' up some deviltry, but let 'em hatch. They'll find ole Dan Rackback ready fur 'em—ready to go right in on his dew-claws, tooth and nail."

"Do you think they will make any demonstration tonight?" asked Searle, betraying some uneasiness.

"What do you think 'bout it?" was Dan's evasive response.

"I hope they will not attack us," answered Searle.

"And so do I," asseverated Dan; "but I'm goin' to put Humility, my dorg thar, on guard, and then woe to the trampozin' smoky-skin that comes 'round here in smellin' distance. For my part, I'm goin' ashore again to keep an eye on the varlets. If they do pitch on to us, it'll not be afore toward mornin'. Jonathan Duncan, this way a minit."

Jonathan and Dan stepped aside, and in as brief a manner as possible the ranger narrated all that he had overheard at the conference opposite the mouth of Rattlesnake creek, and requested Duncan to communicate the facts to the men so that Searle would mistrust nothing of what was going on.

Having thus warned the party of its threatened dangers, Dan left the island.

A few minutes later the clouds thickened overhead, and a slow, misty, drizzling rain set in.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WATER-SLAYER.

The rain that set in so quietly at first, finally developed into a heavy storm, and for several hours poured down in torrents. The Keya Paha had been considerably swollen, and its whole bosom was soon black with floating debris. The waterfall, however, was not sufficiently great to endanger those upon the island. Nearly all of the minor tributaries of the river had long been dry, and these, with the earth that had been suffering of drouth, gathered and held the flood by absorption.

The bee-hunters' fears increased when the rain set in. They knew it was to the advantage of the foe. Under cover of the darkness and din of the storm they could approach the island unknown to the beleaguered party.

Fortunately the storm had spent its fury by midnight—that is, it had ceased raining. The sky, however, was overcast—it was pitchy dark, and a drizzling mist was falling. The sheet-lightning quivered and flashed amid the black jumbled clouds, and the distant thunder rumbled in sullen intonations through the heavens.

During all these hours of wild storm, the figure of a man sat crouched beneath a ledge of rocks about sixty rods above the encampment of the bee-hunters, watching, with a steady, sleepless eye and dogged patience, up and down the river, which at times lay plainly revealed in the lurid gleams of lightning.

The figure was that of Dakota Dan, the ranger.

Already drenched to the skin, he kept his silent ward and watch under the rock. The dull, monotonous patter of the rain, the surge of the waters, and the roll of the thunder, were music to the ears of the old borderman. To him there was an awful and solemn grandeur in the rolling, murmuring river, the tall, sentinel-like trees, the purple-black clouds, and the elements of the storm—all of which seemed contorted and rendered unnatural and grotesque as seen in the livid play of the lightning.

As the hours wore, the soft tread of many feet was heard on the rock that gave the ranger shelter. He knew a number of persons were moving along the path that crossed the rock, and a few moments later he saw a score of forms pause upon the beach a few paces to the right of him. They were all savages, with one or two exceptions—this he could see distinctly in the almost continual play of the fiery wrath of the storm-clouds. All were entirely nude with the exception of a loin-cloth. Around each one's waist was buckled a girdle from which depended a tomahawk.

Among the dusky, grotesque forms, the sturdy hero distinguished that of White Falcon. Knowing full well what they were there for, Dan kept a watchful eye upon them, when the electric flashes permitted their being seen. He saw that each warrior held in his hand a bunch of dry brush or green foliage, which he placed over his head and face in a careful manner, permitting it to rest upon his shoulders.

Dan chuckled to himself and rubbed his hands in glee, as he watched the movements of the unsuspecting foe.

At length he saw one of the savages wade into the river until all but his head was submerged. His head was concealed under the clump of brush, which now rested on the surface of the water. This savage was immediately followed by another and still another of the warriors, until every one present had disappeared in the river. Then all began moving down the stream toward the island of the bee-hunters, swim-

ming and wading, as the case might be. They moved slowly, yet neither slower nor faster than the current.

Amid the scores of other objects floating on the river, no one, not aware of the fact, would have ever dreamed of an Indian's head being concealed under the bunches of twigs and foliage. But Dakota Dan knew it.

He arose from his seat, crept from his concealment and laid aside his outer garments. Then he cut a bough from an adjacent bush, entwined it about his head, waded into the river, and struck boldly out after the red-skins, and soon came up with the hindmost ones.

The tiny waves surging around them emitted sparks of phosphorescent light, and his eyes being on a level with the surface of the river, the old ranger was enabled to select those floating objects which he knew had savage heads concealed within them.

He felt no fears of his presence being detected. Even were his own concealment discovered by the closest savage, it was not probable that the red-skin could discriminate between his covert and that of a friend.

With his hunting-knife clasped firmly in his right hand, the ranger veered slowly off toward one of the floating objects. He soon came within reach of it—he thrust out his hand beneath the waves and clasped the savage by the throat. There was an agitated movement of the Indian's brush, a hand fluttered to the surface of the water, there was a low, gurgling sound, as the doomed brave was borne down beneath the turbid waves. Streaks of crimson stained the water around the ranger's head, a few bubbles came to the surface and burst, the warrior's brush danced away upon the waves, and—all was over.

The ranger again moved forward. The river murmured on in that same sullen tone, as though it held no bloody secret in its bosom; the misty rain continued to fall, and the storm moaned in the distance.

Slowly Dakota Dan moved on toward another of the unsuspecting foe. He soon came within reach of him. There was a slight agitation of the two colliding bunches of brush, a gurgling sound, a few bubbles, and the life of the red-skin was ended.

The silent slayer moved on, and again and again repeated his horrible work, feeling in hopes that every new victim would be the renegade, White Falcon.

The chief, however, kept his position at the head of his friends, secretly exulting in his cunning work. He felt positive of the capture of the island, for already the most difficult part of his plans was accomplished, and a few rods more would bring him to the island. But, suddenly, something touched his head behind.

His first thought was of its being a brave who wished to attract attention, and he stopped and turned his head. He felt the object, whatever it was, still pressing against his brushy concealment.

A gleam of lightning suddenly lit up the river, a low exclamation of horror burst from the lips of the terrified chief. He saw lodged against him the lifeless body of a warrior—one of those who had started to the island with him alive!

White Falcon's first inference was that the warrior had been drowned, disdaining, with that dogged pertinacity so characteristic of Indian stoicism and fortitude to utter a call for help, through fear of defeating the expedition. But the renegade soon had occasion to change his opinion as to the cause of his follower's death. The whole heavens became aglare with lurid lightning that continued for full a minute. The river and surroundings were as plainly revealed as if by the noon-tide sun. The chief, whose eyes were turned up the stream, suddenly beheld one of his warriors leap out of the water, and heard him utter a scream of agony that resounded through

night and forest for miles. He saw him fall backward and float away, his arms beating the water in convulsions of death, while just behind the scene of this drama, over which the curtain of darkness was again drawn, the triumphant war-whoop of Dakota Dan rung forth upon the midnight, and mingled its terrors with the roar of the river and the rumble of the thunder.

Simultaneous almost with the shout of Dakota Dan, a dozen rifles on the island, now not over fifty paces away, poured forth a shower of leaden hail upon the concealed red-skins. As the aim of the bee-hunters, however, had been made at random, the savages sustained no loss. But it warned them that the defenders of the little fort were aware of their stealthy approach, and White Falcon, not knowing how many of his warriors had been slain by his persistent and indefatigable enemy, Dakota Dan, at once ordered a retreat toward the west shore.

But the wildest excitement now prevailed upon the island. During this excitement, and the confusion consequent upon the expected attack, Ishmael Searle and Edith Dufford had disappeared from the interior of the defense.

A hasty, yet careful search of the island was at once made, but the absence of one of the canoes and the tracks of Searle, where he sunk almost shoetop deep in the sand as he bounded across the margin of the bar with Edith an unwilling captive in his arms, told that the villain had made good his escape.

Edith had no doubt been prevented from calling for help by her abductor stifling her voice, and then springing over the wall of the fort into the impenetrable gloom.

In a few minutes Dakota Dan was upon the island, and it was with the most profound astonishment he listened to the story of Edith's disappearance.

Then he stormed with fury, and cursed himself for having, in his desire to defeat the savages, let Ishmael Searle accomplish his villainous object in getting Edith into his power.

Unfastening his dog, the ranger at once announced his determination of starting in search of Edith.

One of the bee-hunters took him ashore in a canoe; then the ranger began his search for the trail. The darkness, however, concealed every vestige of footprints from sight, and the old borderman's only chances lay in the keen scent of Humility.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE YOUNG BEE-HUNTER'S NIGHT OF HORROR.

LEAVING him to pursue his way, we will now look after our young friend, Ruben Gregg, whom we left stricken down by an unseen hand in the forest.

It was the villain Ishmael Searle who dealt the blow. He had left the island for that purpose, and had dogged the footsteps of the young bee-hunter until a favorable opportunity was offered for him to carry out his murderous intent, and all because Ruben stood between him and Edith Dufford.

The first thing of which the youth became conscious, on his partial recovery, was of a vague existence, though he could not tell in what state or sphere. He was surrounded by impenetrable gloom; he was conscious of a severe pain upon the head which numbed his senses. Closing his eyes, he endeavored to think. One by one he recalled the events of the past. Gradually the veil of unconsciousness was lifted from his memory, and the incidents of the past rose in painful distinctness before his mind. He remembered his bee-hunting expedition, the peculiar whistle he had heard near the bee-tree, the figure he had seen partly concealed in the shrubbery, the sweep of an arm above the bushes, the whirr of something through the air, and the sudden blurring of his vision, and then a blank. Where was he now? He opened his eyes and gazed around him. A dark, dismal wall rose on all sides, and a black, lowering roof hung over him.

Through the latter, however, he could see in places the light of day beyond. He could hear a dim rustling sound, like the fluttering of foliage in the breeze; and the sweet, fresh perfumes of the wildwood were wafted into his dark and lonesome prison.

Ruben was prone upon his back and attempted to rise, but found himself totally helpless. He was lying upon a long log, face upward. His arms were bent backward and securely fastened. His legs were also securely tied down. A rope was passed over his body and around the log. Another passed over his throat, thereby rendering him helpless as an infant. Moreover, it brought a bitter conviction to his heart; it told him that he was a prisoner, but to whom he had not the slightest conception.

Peering into the gloom until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, the young bee-hunter was enabled to see, by moving his head from side to side, the nature of his prison. He discovered, to his delight, that he was in the open forest. The log upon which he was bound lay in the bed of a small creek long since gone dry. Over this the arcading branches of the trees formed an avenue, dark, cool and dreary. Only a faint twilight pervaded the place, yet it enabled the youth to distinguish the outlines of the tree-trunks, among which he beheld the figure of an Indian warrior standing, rifle in hand, evidently guarding him.

All was clear to him now, with a single exception. He knew nothing of the time that had elapsed since his captivity. But, having given up all hopes of settling this point, he fell to thinking. He thought of his friends at the island, and wondered if their fate had been similar to his own. His mind went back to Niobrara settlement, and to Edith Dufford. Then sad and bitter thoughts arose in his mind. His spirits began to sink. The wound upon his head began to ache and throb. A burning fever set in, and was succeeded by a maddening thirst. In a few minutes more he was raving in a delirious fever.

His savage guard approached him and examined his bonds. Finding them secure, he went back to a point where he could command a view of the surrounding vicinity for several hundred yards. He heeded not the wild, mad cries of the youth for water; there was no mercy in his savage breast.

The young bee-hunter's suffering was intense. He raved and struggled for long hours. His cries rung in frightful intonations through the aisles of the grim old woods; but all was in vain. In fact, his violent struggling served to increase his mental aberration.

At length, however, the blissful hand of unconsciousness soothed him into a profound silence, and for long hours he lay like one dead.

When he again awoke, it was with the vague belief, conjured up in dreams, that a friend's cool hand was passing over his burning brow, and that a goblet of cool, sparkling water was being held at his lips, while a voice cried out:

"Drink, Ruben Gregg, drink and live."

He opened his parched lips to swallow the proffered beverage, but, alas! it was only a delusion!

The youth gazed up and around him, but all was wrapped in Egyptian gloom. He found he was still in the same painful position on the log; and yet he could not drive the conviction from his mind that a friend was near him. He spoke, but no one answered. He called louder; still no reply. He shouted at the top of his lungs, and a dull sound, like the far-off rumble of thunder, answered him.

Then he felt a shower of water sprinkling his face; a gust of wind fanned his cheeks. A friend, indeed, was near. His Heavenly Father had not been deaf to his cries of distress and appeals for mercy.

A sudden flash of light that for a moment blinded him,

gleamed vividly overhead. It was immediately followed by a sharp clap of thunder.

The whole truth rushed quickly across the youth's mind. A thunder-storm was raging. It was the cool rain falling upon him that had resuscitated the remaining spark of life within, and the wind sweeping up the forest avenue had soothed his feverish brow.

A spark of hope was kindled in his breast. He murmured a prayer of thanks for the relief that was being sent him from Heaven. He opened wide his mouth to catch the rain-drops in his parched and burning throat. But, oh, how few seemed to fall the soothing drops in that one place! All around him he could hear the tantalizing gurgle of rippling water. He could hear the sullen roar of descending rain. It fell in his face, upon his body, but how little between those hot, dry lips!

If he could only have assuaged that awful, torturing thirst, he might survive the night. He called to his savage guard for water, but received no response. He knew not whether the guard was near, and thoughts of being alone brought new terror to his soul when the sharp bark of a wolf was borne to his ears on the wings of the storm.

After all it seemed he was deserted, even by Heaven—that his resuscitation by the falling rain was only to prolong his suffering. He lay and watched the play of the lightning above, and the black clouds trooping across the heavens like somber-winged phantoms. He listened to the crash of the thunder, the moan of the wind and the sullen roar of the rain, to which was added the terrible accompaniment of a panther's scream or a wolf's sharp, gibbering cry. And hark! another cry suddenly bursts forth upon the night and rends the heart of the captive with terror. It is the rush and roar of water. A mighty torrent is coming down the valley! The youth is in the very center of its course, and death is inevitable. He realizes his peril. With the desperation of a madman he exerts every nerve in an effort to break his bonds; but they yield not. The torrent is coming nearer with a roar like that of a mighty river broken from its channel.

In his new danger Ruben forgets his thirst and burning, aching brow. His cries for water are hushed; water is coming in a torrent—in a mighty flood. It will soon be upon him—it will quench his thirst—it will cool his brow—drown out the remnant of life within him!

The youth lifts his voice to Heaven in prayer. The crash of thunder, alternative with the roar of the torrent and shriek of the wind, mocks his supplications in outbursts as if of hoarse, Satanic laughter.

Still on comes the rushing flood. Ruben can now hear it crashing through the undergrowth that lines the banks of the stream with a volume of sound that could not have been more terrific had the waters of the Keya Paha been suddenly turned into that little pent-up valley. It draws nearer and nearer, and all of a sudden it seems to burst and spread outward on either side with a rolling, swashing roar.

A slight feeling of hope pervades the breast of the helpless youth. He knows the cause of this sudden change in the sound of the rushing flood. The water had burst from a narrow valley, down which it was sweeping, into an open valley over which it was now spreading.

This he knew would check the wild onward rush of the torrent, and break the destructive momentum of its current. But the youth's life was still in danger. He was lying bound in the very path of the flood. He might be lifted up and borne away, but there was no hope of escaping death. He would be crushed and ground to atoms amid the breastwork of whirling logs and debris that he knew was being carried down upon the head of the water avalanche.

The roar comes nearer and nearer. The youth can now feel the dashing spray in his face; the torrent is upon him! Like a mighty wave it dashes over him, burying him a dozen

feet beneath its crest. The log to which he is bound quivers, trembles, and rises to the surface, where, rocking to and fro for a moment, it darts down the stream. But it soon stops. It is thrown across the stream and lodges against two larger trees—one on each side of the creek.

The young bee-hunter was still on the uppermost side of the log—out of the water; but his situation was one of the most terrible agony. The log was wedged in under some boughs where it could not rise with the rising flood, and soon it would be overflowed. Already the wild current rushing beneath him was half-way up the side of the log and still rising rapidly.

In a few minutes more it will be submerged. Ruben can feel the water creeping up his arms that are bent backward over the log; it reaches his elbows—his shoulders. Waves dash over him. The surge of the flood now strikes terror to his soul—it has reached the top of the log! Like a cold, clammy serpent it crawls and writhes up his cheeks. He can see the tossing billows that are almost on a level with his eyes. He can see phosphorescent sparks emitted from the dashing waves; a moment more and he will be shut from view beneath the raging flood.

Still the love of life is strong within Ruben Gregg. He shouts for help, shouts until his voice rings forth in startling echoes through the woods. Then he listens. The echoes of his own voice come back to his ears. Again his voice rings forth; again he listens, and—glorious sound! A human voice greets his ears. He listens to hear it repeated, but all is silent save the mad roar of the flood. Horrible mockery! a moan escapes his lips, and he gives up to die. It is then, at the last moment almost, that he hears a voice call out:

"Hello, stranger, be you in trouble? What be the matter? whar be ye? and what mought be your name?"

"Help! help! for God's sake, be you friend or foe, or I shall drown! I am bound to a log, and the water is rising over me. I am Ruben Gregg, of—"

"Thar, thar! stop, stop right thar, stranger," came a reply from out the darkness. "Stop right thar, or, by the Lord, I'll let you drown dead as thunder."

This strange command was immediately followed by a splashing in the water, and guided by Ruben's appeals for help, the stranger made his way by swimming to where the youth was fast disappearing beneath the water.

The young bee-hunter soon made known his predicament, and to his infinite joy the stranger cut his bonds, then "towed" him safely out of the seething caldron of water.

As soon as they were upon dry ground, Ruben gazed up into the face of his deliverer, with a thankful and interrogative look.

The man seemed to define his thoughts, and said:

"Don't make yerself a bit uneasy, lad. I'm a friend to you, if you're Ruben Gregg. I'm ole Dan Rackback, I are, tho' I'm sumtimes called Dakota Dan, the Ranger."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DARING ACT AND A SAD CLIMAX.

RUBEN GREGG attempted to rise to his feet the moment his deliverer placed him upon the shore; but his aching limbs refused his weight; and he sunk to the earth. His cramped and painful position upon the log, his suffering and horror had well-nigh stopped the circulation of life.

"You are in a bad fix, Ruben Gregg," said the ranger, in his bluff, familiar manner; "you are, by Judeal! You want rubbin', you do, to start the blood, then ye can walk. Yas, that war an abominable predickamint you war in, my boy. How did ye git yourself thar? Who done it—white-skin, or

smoky? Speak right slap-dab out. Needn't be afraid. I'm ole Dakota Dan, and this here critter by my side is my dorg, Humility, and a noble feller he are, too—good blood in him."

Ruben's joy and delight were inexpressible. He knew by the man's outspoken and whimsical tone that he was telling the truth—that his was an honest, brave and generous heart. The blood that had been almost congealed in the youth's veins, now leaped in hot currents through his whole frame. He realized that he was saved from a terrible death, and once more with a friend—the famous Dakota Dan.

Ruben briefly narrated his adventures from the time he left the island up to the moment of his rescue, when, in turn, Dan gave him an account of what had transpired at the island, and it was with a feeling of the most intense agony that the youth learned of the capture of his betrothed, Edith Dufford.

Action seemed to fire the very soul of the boy, and in a minute he was upon his feet, begging the ranger to lead the way in the search for the maiden and her abductor.

By this time the night was far advanced. It had ceased raining, and the surface of the earth was well drained, although the small streams were still rising.

Dakota Dan led the way through the forest, happy and jubilant over his night's success.

They had journeyed some distance, when the twinkling of a light far ahead suddenly caught the eye of the old ranger, who at once ordered a halt.

Humility sniffed the air and whined, which convinced his master of the presence of danger.

The ranger and his young companion moved on, and as they approached the camp-fire, discovered it to be the bivouac of a small party of savages.

Silently they crept on still closer until they could command a fair view of the camp, and distinguish more readily the forms around it.

To the mingled astonishment and joy of both the scouts, they discovered Ishmael Searle and Edith Dufford among the party. Searle was walking about with all the freedom of one of the warriors, but the maiden was a captive; her hands were bound; she sat upon a blanket, with her head bowed in grief.

A muttered oath escaped Dan's lips, while he could scarcely restrain Ruben from rushing into the camp and attempting the girl's rescue.

"Take it easy—softly, Ruben," he commanded. "Keep jist as cool as a polar iceberg. Trust the gal's rescue to me and Humility, my dorg thar, and I'll bet the case 'll be done up systematical. We've never failed yit in discombobaratin' our foes. No, lad; Dakota Dan, the great triangle of the Nor'-west, is sure death to a red-skin. Howsumever, that's one of the angles absent. That's Patience, my mare. She's over t'other side of the river, feedin' up; but then, me and that dorg can work well alone. You see thar is jist four of them red-skins thar, besides that blasted rapsallion, Ishmael Searle. Wal, my plan for that little gal's reskoo is made. I'm goin' to sail boldly into their camp, pistols in hand ready to speak. They'll cover two of the varlets, Humility 'll cover another, and the other two that'll be left dar'n't move. You'll take this 'ere knife and foller clus arter us, and when things are settled, cut the gal's bonds and then see that she's safe into the woods. Us two angles here will hold the varlets under kiver of eye, tooth and pistol, till yer cl'ar of the light, then we'll jine ye."

"But how'll you follow us in the dark?" asked Ruben.

"Lord, boy, ain't Humility, my dorg here, got the keenest snozzle that ever sniffed out the trail of an Ingin, or squiz the daylight outen a catamount?"

"I see now," replied Ruben. "I did not think of your

dog. I am ready to follow and take part in anything that happens."

With a cocked pistol in each hand, Dakota Dan moved carefully forward with Humility at his side and Ruben close behind.

When within a few paces of the camp, the ranger sprung suddenly forward and landed within the radius of the light.

The savages and Ishmael Scarle started at sound of his approach.

"Don't, I say!" burst from Dan's lips, in a tone rife with deadly meaning; "don't move a hand, Ish Scarle—you, or a savage—or, by the gods of Mount Olympus, I'll let blizzer—I'll be your termination, your millennium—STAND!"

The last word was uttered in a tone that seemed to awe the astounded foes, and strike terror to the soul of Ishmael Scarle; while the savages recoiled, with abject fear stamped on their dusky faces.

Humility stood crouched for a spring, his eyes burning with a greenish light, his tail moving slowly, and his white fangs glittering beneath his red, quivering lips. He was a foe that the red-skins had no desire to encounter. They feared him more than his master; and each one stood motionless under the horrible fascination that comes of fear of instant death, certain that the deadly, glaring eyes of the dog were fixed alone upon him.

So surprised and awed had the savages been by this bold and daring intrusion, and the firm and unflinching attitude of the intruders, that for a moment they seemed rooted to the very spot where they stood.

Scarle carried no weapons that were visible. The savages had laid their rifles aside, which were now beyond their reach. There were knives in their girdles, but under cover of the two leveled pistols, and the still more dreaded horror, Humility's burning eyes, they dare not move a muscle.

Edith glanced up at the sound of Dakota Dan's voice. She saw Ruben, and a cry burst from her lips. The youth sprung forward and with one stroke severed her bonds; and then, with a whispered word of endearment, he drew her arm within his and hurried her away into the gloom.

All this occurred within a small fraction of the time it takes to tell it. Scarcely half a minute had elapsed from the moment the rescuing party entered the camp until Ruben was gone with his prize.

The ranger was well satisfied that they would have to act upon the spur of the moment if they would be successful. He knew the savages would close in upon them the instant they fully comprehended the situation; and this he could see they were not slow in doing. He could see the demon rising within them, and rather than await their onslaught he began moving slowly backward, his pistols still covering two of the foe.

The savages comprehended his movement, and with a yell they sprung to their rifles. The ranger turned and bounded into the shadows just as the savages sent a random volley after him.

The leaden missiles clipped through the leaves around the borderman—he staggered and almost fell, but gathering himself up, he hurried on.

He soon came up with Ruben and Edith.

"Hurry on, young folks," he said; "the smoky varlets are arter us hot and heavy."

The words came slow, almost in gasps, from the old ranger's lips. It was evident that he was apprehensive of renewed dangers, or was growing nervous from some cause or other. He hurried on with heavy footsteps—panting like an overworked ox, and at times reeling as if about to sink with sheer exhaustion.

They could hear the savages crashing through the under-growth upon their trail.

Every moment brought them nearer and nearer to the flying fugitives.

Suddenly, Dan, who was before, sunk heavily to the earth.

"Why, Dan, have you given out?" asked Ruben, pausing by the fallen man's side.

"No, no, Ruben; hurry on with that little gal. Leave me here to die—it's as good a place as any. I'm wounded, boy, to the death. The devils shot an awful leak into me as I dashed into the woods. Gallons and gallons of good blood—good Rackback blood—are runnin' to waste. But that's no cure now. Go on, Ruben, with that gal—don't let the cusses git her, or may the curses of Heaven fall upon you. I'm good as dead, I tell you; you can do me no good—go on, I say! Don't you hear them comin' right there? Go!"

There was something so unearthly in the last word that Ruben recoiled from him—turned, and with Edith hurried on through the grim old woods.

CHAPTER XIX.

FRIENDS TO THE RESCUE.

RUBEN and Edith hurried forward, scarcely knowing where they were going—whether away from danger or right into it. They spoke but few words, but moved on, their hearts throbbing with the emotions of joy and sorrow—joy over their escape, and sorrow for the noble old friend who had fallen in their behalf.

Suddenly the report of firearms, mingled with wild shouts, arose on the air behind them.

The almost exhausted fugitives came to a halt and listened. Amid the savage yells behind, they could distinguish the shouts of white men.

The report of the firearms lasted but a few moments, but were succeeded by shouts of triumph and moans of agony.

"I do believe that a party of friends has dropped in between us and the savages, Edie," said Ruben.

"Oh, pray it may be so! I hope they have been in time to save the good ranger, Dakota Dan," replied Edith. "To him is owing my first escape from the Indians. He is a noble old man."

"Ah! those shouts are from the lips of white men!" exclaimed the youth, joyfully. "We are saved, Edie! It is no doubt the bee-hunters, or a party from Niobrara. Let us try and find out who they are, anyhow, and if friends, join them."

They turned and started back. They soon came within a few rods of the party whose cries of triumph had resounded through the forest a few minutes before.

True enough, it proved to be a band of settlers from Niobrara, in search of Edith and Mehitable.

Shouts of joy and triumph pealed forth again and again upon the air, when Ruben and Edith joined the settlers.

In as brief a manner as possible the two fugitives narrated the story of their trials and sufferings. Then Ruben, not forgetful of him who had saved him from perishing, Dakota Dan, led in the search for the body of the unfortunate ranger. But it could not be found. An hour of eager searching proved unavailing. The ranger, so all concluded, must have crawled away, after he fell, into some dark recess of the woods, and died. At least, this was the supposition, and fearing to endanger their situation by continuing a hopeless search, the party set off for the camp of the bee-hunters, guided by Ruben Gregg.

As they journeyed silently along, a rifle by the wayside suddenly rung out. A groan from the lips of one of the set-

tlers succeeded it. Barak Gregg, Ruben's father, fell mortally wounded—shot down by the hand of an unknown assassin that lurked in the darkness.

In a moment Ruben was at the old man's side, kneeling over him.

"Father, are you hurt?" he asked, lifting the sinking head of the old man.

A groan, that attested the father's agony, was the only response. The settlers gathered around him, and with much difficulty, owing to the darkness, succeeded in finding the wound. He had been shot through the breast, the ball having evidently passed through the left lobe of the lungs, and death was inevitable.

In the gloom of the woods, the party could render their wounded friend but little alleviation from the agony he was suffering. So a litter was hastily constructed and the old man placed upon it. Then four men lifted him up and bore him carefully away through the forest, though almost every step forced a groan from his lips.

Just at daybreak the party reached the Keya Paha opposite the bee-hunters' camp. Having made known their presence to those at the little fort, canoes were brought over and the party taken over to the island.

Great was the joy of the bee-hunters over the return of Ruben and Edith, but deep their sorrow over the dying old settler, Barak Gregg.

All that mortal power—such as was invested in the settlers—could do, was done for the wounded man, notwithstanding the nature of the wound precluded all hopes of earthly aid saving him.

Ruben's sorrow was great. He sat by his father's bedside, constant in his administrations.

A messenger had been sent to Niobrara with the news of Edith and Mehitable's rescue, and to break to Gregg's family the sad news of his fatal injuries.

The day following, Edith and Mehitable were sent to Niobrara, under a strong escort. Only six of the bee-hunters, besides Jonathan Duncan, remained with the dying Barak Gregg, whom it was impossible to move.

Mrs. Gregg and her other boys at once hurried to the island on learning of the old man's condition.

Contrary to the belief of all, Barak Gregg lingered along between life and death for several days, and some had come to entertain hopes of his recovery. But at length a change came for the worse, and he began to sink rapidly. Death became visible in every feature, and fully conscious of the change that was so soon to come, Gregg called his friends around him, and in a strong voice, said:

"Friends, it seems that I have got to die, but the Lord's will be done. I have shot my last gun, followed my last trail, and done my last act of sin, and now am to leave ye, and go into the great Hereafter, where ye'll all go by-and-by. Let me here admonish you all to live a better life than I have, so that when you come to die, ye may not be burdened with sin, as I be. If I had only led a good life, and could die with clean hands, I would now be thankful. But, Lord, I confess my sins, which have been greatest only to Barak Gregg. I have seriously wronged but one person in all my life, but this wrong I can yet make right. And now bear witness—all of you—to the dying confession of Barak Gregg. Ruben, there—Ruben Gregg is not our boy! He is the son of one Charles Lonsdale, of the far South."

"Lonsdale—Charles Lonsdale, did you say?" cried Jonathan Duncan, advancing nearer the old man's side.

"Yes, Lonsdale," replied Gregg, gazing up at Duncan with a wild look in his eyes.

"Go on with your story; you will pardon me for my interruption," responded Duncan.

"Yes, Ruben is Charles Lonsdale's child. A villain stole

him from his home a few minutes after he was born. He brought the babe to our secluded home, and paid us well in advance to keep it. We grew to love it as an own child, and for fear it would be taken from us some day, we pulled up and left the country unknown to any of our neighbors, and—"

"Then your name is not Gregg," said Duncan, "but Bond—Caleb Bond."

The dying man started up almost into a sitting posture, with a wild look in his eyes.

"Caleb Bond, the boatman," he muttered, sinking back upon his couch. "Yes, yes; I am Caleb Bond, though I had nearly forgotten it myself, it has been so long since I heard the name spoken. No, Ruben is not our child, but that of Charles Lonsdale."

"Then he is the very individual that I am in search of, and have been for two years," said Duncan.

"Then you are an officer—oh, Heaven! will my poor old wife have to suffer after I am gone for this dying confession? —for the confession of a sin that—"

"No, no, Mr. Gregg; your wife shall not suffer. The Lonsdale child is all I want. Rest assured your wife will not regret that you made this confession."

"Thank God!" muttered the old man, breathing easier.

He soon sunk so low that he could speak only in a whisper, and that, too, with much difficulty. Finally he sunk into an easy, quiet slumber. The bee-hunters went out of the tent and moved quietly about, conversing in whispers.

Every heart had been touched by the death-bed scene.

The moments wore on with leaden feet.

At length a woman's wail issued from the tent. It spoke plainer than words:

Caleb Bond was dead.

CHAPTER XX.

SO BE IT.

CALEB BOND, alias Barak Gregg, was buried on the left shore of the Keya Paha, his grave being carefully concealed from savage eyes.

Then the little party was ready to take up its line of march for Niobrara settlement.

Jonathan Duncan accompanied them, for Ruben had consented to go with him to the South to claim his fortune, after he had once more visited the old home at Niobrara and made some arrangements concerning the future with his betrothed, Edith Dufford.

Mrs. Bond confirmed the dying confession of her husband, regarding the Lonsdale heir, even giving additional testimony which served to remove every doubt from Jonathan's mind of the youth's parentage. For all Ruben's face bore no resemblance to that of his mother in the picture, it was no evidence of his not being her child.

The remarkable similarity of features existing between the picture and Edith Dufford could be accounted for on no other ground than that of a remarkable coincidence.

The little party left the island in canoes, their bee-hunting excursion having been voted a decided failure. Not a pound of honey had been secured. But, taking all in all, none of them were sorry they had ventured forth, for they had accomplished some good as it was.

The fate of Dakota Dan, however, was a mystery to them all, that hung like a pall upon their hearts. They had searched the woods thoroughly for him, but not a trace could be found of either him or his dog.

The Indians disturbed the homeward bound party but little during its first half-day's journey, and after that they disappeared altogether.

The day was drawing near its close, and the party was

discussing the propriety of going into camp for the night, when the deep baying of a dog burst suddenly upon their ears.

A moment later a rude, yet familiar voice—a voice that sent a thrill of joy to every heart—called out:

"Hello, over there, folks. Goin' home, ain't you? Got too hot fur ye, didn't it?"

"Dakota Dan, the ranger, thank God!" cried Ruben, his face beaming with joy.

True enough; the old ranger, mounted upon Patience, with Humility at his side, had drawn rein upon the river-bank, and was regarding them with unfeigned curiosity.

The boats were at once headed toward the shore, and were met at the water's edge by the bluff old ranger, who seemed as highly pleased to meet them as did they on meeting him.

"Indeed, Dan, this is a joyous surprise," said Ruben, "for we have mourned you as dead ever since that terrible night of storm and adventure."

"So has Humility, my dorg here," replied the ranger, "and I thought I war dead, too, for a while—but is that leetle gal safe, Rubing?"

"She is, Dan, thanks to your courage. But where have you been ever since that memorable night?"

"Been dead part of the time, boy—dead as a door nail. The varlets shot a hole into me that night that let out every blessed drop of blood in me. And when I fell thar, what should ole Humility do but drag me away into the bresh, whar I laid—well, the Lord only knows how long. When I awoke, I crawled away and got into a little cave on the river-bank, and thar I tried my level best to die, but couldn't to save me. I war so plaguy shaky in the knees that I had to lay three or four days afore I could venture out, and then I hadn't a drap of good Rackback blood in me. Yes, yes, boys; that come abominable nigh bein' my last predicament, but reckon I'll pick up now, and weather it through."

"You look pale, Dan—the worse for the wear and tear of the last week," replied Ruben.

"I never did look very handsome—no great shakes on beauty. But, I can't say that about the rest of the great Triangle, Patience, my mare here, and Humility, my dorg thar. They're splendid critters—come of good Puritan stock, and know more than a million red-skins do. You see, boys, we make the great Tri-angle of the Nor'-west, known as Dakota Dan. It takes man, hoof and howler to make that Ingin-extarminator. Take the mare and dorg out and you simply have ole Dan-i-el Rackback left, and he alone couldn't do much angelizin' Ingins. Good blood in the Rackback family, and it'll stand an awful drawin' out, but I come holy nigh cavin', boys. On yer way back, I reckon, ar'n't ye, folks?"

"Yes, we have had adventure enough," replied Ruben, "for a time at least. But now, Dan, we shall insist on you going down to Niobrara settlement with us and remaining there until you rest and recuperate your health and strength. We will accept no excuse from you, but will consider it an honor and a pleasure to have you with us."

"Wal, boy, es I'm a leetle shaky in the system—es Patience, my mare here, is sum'at jaded—es Humility, my dorg thar, is sum'at discomfoborated, I don't keer if the great Tri-angle—the Ingin angelizer of the Nor'-west, does drap down to Niobrara with you, and put in a few days reorganizin' and reconstructin' its solar system. Besides, I want to cut you out of that leetle gal, Rubing."

The old ranger went off into a fit of rollicking laughter that made all feel good to hear him. Humility licked his chops and laid down, and Patience switched her tail and relapsed into her usual dormant attitude.

The matter being settled, the party went into camp.

The night passed without any trouble from the Indians, and by daylight the following morning the party was on the move.

Niobrara was reached by noon, and great was the joy that reigned therein over the return of the last of its citizens; and, as long as he remained at the settlement, the settlers all seemed to vie with each other in paying homage to their distinguished guest, Dakota Dan, the Ranger of Keya Paha.

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